

# Temperament & Parenting

Understanding your child's unique personality



## Know your child's temperament

When mothers get together, they tend to discuss their new experiences as they tap into early motherhood. Some mothers will describe their child as “easy.” They will tell you their child is calm, easily follows a set routine, and generally remains positive in new situations. Other mothers will describe their child as more “difficult.” They might tell you about their child's inconsistent schedules and inability to easily adapt to new situations. These different terms of “easy” and “difficult” that mothers use when describing their child is known as temperament.

Temperament is defined as individual differences in reactivity to stimuli and self-regulation in emotion, motor activity, and attention. Every child is born with a unique temperament that impacts how they behave and react in situations, their attitudes and feelings, and their level of fear, irritation and distress. A child's capability to adapt to the environment, either with ease or with difficulty, depends on his/her temperament. It appears early in development and becomes quite stable by the time the child reaches the school years. Temperament shapes children's relations with others, the way others react to them, and consequently their social functioning. In early childhood, exhibiting *socially appropriate*



### Easy Child

Regular feeding & nap schedule, adaptable, overall positive mood, approachable



### Difficult Child

Inconsistent feeding & nap schedule, unpleasant mood, adapts slowly, cries in new situations



### Slow-to-Warm-Up Child

Uncomfortable and clingy to parents in new situations, slow to show a negative mood, shy & quiet

*behaviors* is extremely important for children's primary success, adjustment, and socio-emotional outcomes. For instance, children with increased social skills enjoy greater peer acceptance and academic success compared to children with less socially appropriate behaviors.

### The question is, how can we promote these socially appropriate behaviors?

Findings suggest that parenting and temperament play a collaborative role in the development of children's socially appropriate behaviors and competence. For instance, positive parenting that consists of high levels of support and warmth is associated with greater social competence and less behavioral problems. Whereas negative parenting that consists of high levels of hostility and rejection is associated with children's poorer socio-emotional outcomes like aggression, peer avoidance, and antisocial behaviors. Child temperament might also play a role in the development of children's socially appropriate behaviors. For instance, increased levels of irritability in children puts them at a greater risk for externalizing problems, and thus, trouble in social functioning. It is important to note that whether your child falls into the "easy" or "difficult" category, it is not your fault. Although you cannot control your child's temperament, you can still foster socially appropriate behaviors by controlling the way you mindfully interact with your child and how at-ease your child feels in his/her environment. Positive parenting interacts with child temperament and impacts the development of children's socially appropriate behavior. For example, difficult children are less likely to have externalizing problems when parents encourage productive activities and play. Children with low self-regulation and anger proneness at 30 months exhibit less externalizing behaviors at 40 months when their mothers are highly responsive. Therefore, it is important for parents to understand their child's temperament in order to value their child's uniqueness, tailor their approach to what suits him/her best, and consequently promote socially appropriate behaviors through positive parenting.



### The Three Types of Temperament

There are nine characteristics of temperament (shown in the table below) and each child shows a unique pattern. Out of these nine characteristics, there are three broad categories children generally fit in:

1. **The easy child** is in most cases easy-going, positive in mood of mild to moderate intensity, and has regular feeding and sleeping habits. He/she is generally happy, approachable, and can easily adapt to new situations and people. In a frustrating environment, the easy child remains cheerful and reacts with little anxiety. Children in this category are easy for parents, for instance, they quickly begin to sleep through the night and are easily toilet trained.
2. **The slow-to-warm-up child** adapts slowly, experiences discomfort around new people, and is usually shy and hesitant when confronted by new circumstances. He/she has moods of mild intensity and negative moods are expressed slowly. In strange situations, these children are at a greater risk for

problems in anxiety and separation. When approached by new people, a child in this category is most likely to withdraw and cling to parents. However, as the child becomes more comfortable, he/she becomes more tolerant.

3. **The difficult child** expresses unpleasant moods, cries in new situations, and poorly adapts to change. Children in this category have irregular sleeping and feeding habits and react to their environment negatively and intensely. In infancy, these children are fussy and easily cry. As young children, they are stubborn, intense, and exhibit temper tantrums. At school, children with difficult temperaments experience trouble adjusting to school, greater behavioral problems, and frequent complaints from teachers. Unlike the easy child, a difficult child increases tension and stress in the family.



### Things You Can Do

- ▶ For children who are anxious, shy or withdrawn in new situations, it is best for parents to softly encourage them to explore their environment. When these children are forced to socialize with others, their shyness and hesitation increases. However, when parents provide support and reassurance of a safe environment, these children can adapt at their own pace and slowly interact with others.
- ▶ For children who are fearless and show risky behaviors, it is best for parents to show greater affection, stay warm and loving, set limitations, and follow stable routines.
- ▶ For children with difficult temperaments, it is important for parents to understand what this exactly entails. Parents who do not comprehend that their child's difficult behaviors are a normal part of their biology will experience resentment towards their child. They may become aggressive, which in return reinforces difficult behaviors. The key to deal with difficult children is often to wait out their tantrums, understand their big feelings, remain patient, and be consistent when dealing with them.

Generally, children's temperaments are improved when parents express greater affection and support, set boundaries, implement positive discipline, and react consistently to their needs.

## THE NINE CHARACTERISTICS OF TEMPERAMENT

**Activity level:** the level of physical activity, restlessness or fidgety behavior that a child shows daily

**Biological regularity:** how consistent or regular a child's feeding and sleep habits are

**Approach and withdrawal:** how a child first reacts to a new person or unfamiliar situation (quick or slow).

**Adaptability:** how easy or difficult a child adapts to a new situation or change and sorts a negative response

**Intensity:** the energy level in which a child reacts to positive or negative situations

**Mood:** the level of pleasant words and behaviors (positive mood) as opposed to unpleasant (negative mood)

**Attention span:** how long a child can concentrate on a difficult activity with or without distraction.

**Distractibility:** how easily a child is distracted from an activity by outside stimulus (visual or auditory)

**Sensory threshold:** the level of stimulation needed for a child to react. Some children react to minor stimulation while other children need greater levels

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