

Your child's Temperament:

Inborn temperament plays a huge role in accounting for children's behaviour. Infants are not born empty vessels, but come into the world exhibiting remarkable differences in how they respond to their parents. Furthermore, what often strikes parents as unusual, difficult, or even abnormal behaviour might instead be perfectly natural expression of the child's innate temperament.

Psychologists would suggest that there are nine distinct dimensions reflecting differences in temperament that influence how your children respond to the world around them. You might be mystified and dismayed, for example, by your child's chronic irritability, his or her difficulty getting to sleep, especially when overtired or over-stimulated, or your child's strong negative reaction to anything new. This kind of child, for example, fits the temperamental profile of a child born with low adaptability: that is having a hard time adapting to and tolerating even ordinary daily transitions, such as waking and sleeping or being dressed and undressed.

While it is difficult to know how to handle a temperamentally extreme child, it can be comforting and empowering, to know that you can begin to relax and respond to your child with more understanding and far less anxiety and blaming yourself for being a bad parent. Many people naively think that a child that acts in some extreme way does so because he or she is not being disciplined or parented properly. In many cases nothing could be further from the truth.

If you have a child that has an extreme temperament it can be reassuring to know that there are other children like yours and other parents who needlessly felt worried, alone, and even hopeless. Having an awareness of temperament can help you to be curious, rather than judgmental. And you can begin to see how your own temperament reacts with your child's.

When parents and therapists don't know the child and are unfamiliar with his or her particular behaviour, it can lead to assuming something is seriously wrong with the child when no illness or disorder exists. When toileting problems, biting, tantrums, school refusal, and other serious behavioural concerns in children come to people's attention, they should not automatically assume there's a serious disorder in the child or family.

It isn't, of course, appropriate to assume that all unusual behaviour in children is normal. Still, as a parent and psychologist, I've seen many unusual and potentially worrying behaviours that make sense when one takes into account who this particular child is--what his or her temperament is--and in what situation the behaviour is occurring. Even a seemingly big problem doesn't necessarily scream for a big response, but it does call for an effective and persistent response. Responding to a child in a way that is more likely to be effective requires understanding of his or her temperament.

There are nine temperament dimensions to childhood temperament:

1. **Activity** measures the amount of physical energy a child puts into behaviour and daily activities. A very active infant moves around a lot, even when sleeping. Highly energetic children often prefer more active kinds of play to quiet, indoor pursuits. They fall off things, twirl about or fidget a lot, get up repeatedly and walk around the room while doing homework. Some of them go non-stop, willingly falling into a deep sleep only when they're exhausted and their bodies give out.
2. **Intensity** refers to the level of energy a child puts into self-expression; it's a measure of a child's volume and drama. Intense children express all their emotions with vigour and gusto. They may talk and sing, laugh, and fly into rages with equal abandon. They tend to speak in extremes: they had the "best" day of their lives or the "worst". These children are delightfully enthusiastic when they're in a good mood; and can be foul when in a bad one.
3. **Sensitivity** is a measure of a child's sensory threshold. A child who's low in sensitivity is better equipped to handle a stimulating environment, such as company or shopping. A child high in sensitivity has a low tolerance for these settings and is prone to falling apart with too much exposure. Sensitive children are very reactive to physical stimuli--sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch.
4. **Regularity** measures how predictable or unpredictable a child's biological functions are, such as hunger, fatigue, or bowel movements. Irregular children may not be hungry at regular times. Children who are very regular are easy to predict and to put on a schedule. They tend to do well in the structured, predictable environment of school, whereas irregular children may have more difficulty.
5. **Persistence, or Frustration Tolerance** measures a child's ability to complete a task in the face of obstacles. Children who are low in frustration tolerance tend to give up easily when faced with a challenge, such

as trying to reach a toy, building with LEGO, dressing a doll, tying a shoe. Infants who are low in frustration tolerance often protest being left to sit, lie, or play by themselves.

6. Distractibility measures a child's tendency to be diverted by noise, interruptions, and other environmental stimuli. Children high in distractibility are acutely aware of everything that's going on around them. They may flit from one distraction to another, especially if they're also active. Easily distractible infants tend to be easy to soothe, whereas infants who are low in distractibility are often hard to soothe: they want what they want.

7. Approach/Withdrawal measures an infant's initial reaction to a new food, person, experience, or situation. Approaching infants tend to have a positive first reaction. Children who are very approaching are often also very active; they may barrel into new situations, sometimes intimidating other children, and may benefit from some help in learning to slow down a bit. Withdrawing children have a negative first reaction, though they may warm up in a short time if the experience isn't forced on them.

8. Adaptability measures a child's adjustment to changes and transitions after their initial reaction to them. Infants who are high in adaptability are the ones you can take anywhere. They can sleep anywhere and handle disruptions to their routine well. Highly adaptable children do well with changes and transitions--which tends to make them easygoing.

9. Mood is a measure of a child's disposition. Some infants fuss and cry a lot; others are smiley and contented babies. Some children experience their cup as half full and tend toward a positive outlook; others experience their cup as half empty and have a more negative or pessimistic outlook.

The great value in the temperament perspective is in how widely applicable and useful it is. It gives parents a neutral framework for analysing and dealing with difficult children. Taking temperament into account empowers parents by adjusting and enlarging their perceptions of who their children are, and helps them respond to children in ways that are a good fit for their individual personal styles. It allows all infants to be "good" babies without blaming mothers (or fathers) for implied "bad" babies, who happen to be temperamentally challenging.

A temperament approach isn't a panacea. Learning about temperament doesn't transform temperamentally challenging children into easygoing boys and girls. But knowing about temperament helped us understand and parent better, and over the years, we notice an important shift--the hard times are not so hard, nor do they last as long.