

Parent Connections



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Spring 2014 April, May, June
Volume 1 / Issue 1

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Understanding “Temperament”

What Is Temperament?

A child’s temperament describes his/her “personal style,” the way in which she approaches and reacts to the world. Temperament influences a child’s behavior and the way she interacts with others. While temperament does not clearly define or predict behavior, understanding a child’s temperament can help better understand how young children react and relate to the world around them. Information about temperament can also guide parents and caregivers to identify children’s strengths and the supports they need to succeed in their relationships and environments.

Researchers have described young children’s temperament by depicting several different traits. These traits address an infant’s or toddler’s level of activity, how she responds to new situations, her mood, the intensity of her reactions, her sensitivity, to what’s going on around her, how quickly she adapts to changes, and how distractible and persistent she might be when engaging in an activity.

Based on these traits, researchers generally categorize children into three temperament types:

- **Easy or flexible** children tend to be happy, regular in sleeping and eating habits, adaptable, calm, and not easily upset.
- **Active or feisty** children may be irregular in feeding and sleeping habits, fearful of new people and situations, easily upset by noise and stimulation, and intense in their reactions and seem “fussy.”
- **Slow to warm or cautious** children may be less active and may withdraw or react negatively to new situations; but over time they may become more positive with repeated exposure to a new person, object, or situation.

Why is Temperament Important?

By understanding temperament, caregivers can learn how to help children express their preferences, desires, and feelings appropriately. Caregivers and families can also use their understanding of temperament to avoid blaming themselves or a child for reactions that are normal for that particular child. Most importantly, adults can learn to anticipate issues before they occur and avoid frustrating themselves and the child by using approaches that do not match her temperament.



Will I “Spoil” My Baby?

Many new parents are concerned about spoiling their newborn. However, experts say that crying in babies is a sign of communication—not manipulation and that responding in a nurturing way to a baby’s cries builds trust and security

Darcia Narvaez, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Notre Dame, “For the first three months you need to become an external womb for your baby. Meet all his needs—just as they were met in the womb—and you’ll have a calmer, happier baby.”

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Using What You Know About Temperament to Promote Positive Social-Emotional Development

You can use your knowledge of temperament to support positive social-emotional development in infants/toddlers:

1. Reflect on your own temperament and preferences. Knowing more about your own temperament traits can help you to consider the child's perspective. For example, if you enjoy movement, loud music playing, and constant bustle, try to imagine what it would feel like to spend all day in a setting that was calm, hushed, and quiet. This reflective process can help you become more attuned to the experience of your child. You can then determine what adjustments might be needed to create a better fit for the child based on his/her temperament.

2. Create partnerships with caregiver to understand your child's temperament. Share what you know about your child's temperament with other caregivers (family member, daycare worker, etc) and provide tips for "what works" with your child.

3. Monitor and adjust. As children grow, develop, and learn to interact with others, the environment, and their families, shifts in temperament might occur.

4. Refrain from judging a child's temperamental traits as "good" or "bad." One temperament isn't "better" than another, they are all just different ways of interacting with the world. Try to see your child's approach to the world through a positive lens and understand the contribution your child's temperament type makes to the family. The active or feisty children are often leaders and creators of games, or initiators of play. The slow to warm or cautious child may observe situations carefully and help you notice things you hadn't before. The flexible or easy child may take new play partners on easily. Support your child's development by recognizing and valuing his unique traits, rather than trying to change his temperamental traits.

- For the **easy or flexible** child, make sure to check in with her, and initiate communication about her emotions. She might be less likely to demand attention and make her needs or distress known. Use language to develop her awareness and understanding of her own emotions, feelings, and reactions. Encourage her to seek help when she needs it.
- For the **active or feisty** child, be prepared to be flexible and patient in your interactions. A child who is feisty can experience intense emotions and reactions. Stay calm when faced with the child's intense emotions. Reassure him by acknowledging his feelings, and also point out to him when he is calm so he can learn to recognize his emotions on his own as he grows. Provide opportunities for her to make choices, and engage her in gross-motor and active play to burn off high energy levels. Plan transitions from one activity to the next and get down on the child's level to make sure he understands what will happen next. Feisty children might need a peaceful place to help them calm themselves and transition from playtime to rest or naptime.
- For the **slow to warm** or cautious child, set up a predictable environment and stick to a clear routine. Use pictures and language to remind the cautious child what will happen next. Give children who are cautious ample time to establish relationships with new children or to get comfortable in new situations and provide additional preparation and support if there will be changes. Help your child in unfamiliar situations by observing her cues carefully and by providing support and encouragement for her exploration and increasing independence. (*"I'm here. I'll be right in this chair watching you try on the dress-up clothes"*).



Parental Stress Affects Infants and Toddlers

Pay special attention to the stress in your life that may be trickling down to your child. For example, if you've had a terrible day at work, your child may be fussy that evening. Of course, he doesn't understand what you're going through, but even very young infants can pick up on your stress and respond in the only way they know—through behavior. Try some tickle-time or a fun game to ease the stress.

What is infant and toddler "mental health?"

In young children, mental health is healthy social and emotional development. Social-emotional development in infants and toddlers is:

"the capacity of the young child to experience, regulate, and express emotions – to form close and secure relationships -- and to explore the environment and learn, in a caregiving environment that includes family and community."

Definition of infant mental health. Washington, D.C.: Zero To Three; 2001.

Children rely on a safe, strong, and nurturing connection with their caregivers (parents, other family, daycare providers, others in the community involved with the family) to master the social-emotional developmental milestones of early childhood.

Healthy social and emotional development in the first few years of life helps our children manage themselves and relate to others so that they arrive to kindergarten – and beyond -- prepared and ready to learn with the ability to:

Make friends. Get along with others and figure out conflicts peacefully. Wait patiently. Follow rules.

All of these qualities, and more, describe healthy social-emotional skills children develop in small steps, with practice and loving support over time. Loving relationships give children the tools to form friendships, communicate emotions, deal with challenges, develop trust, empathy, compassion, and a sense of right and wrong. Children who do not have stable, supportive home environments in which to develop these skills can grow into adults who still lack this foundation.

As a parent, what can you do to support social-emotional development in your child from birth to age three?

The First Year:

From birth, babies learn who they are by how they are treated. Through everyday interactions, parents, relatives and caregivers send messages like: *You're clever. You're good at figuring things out. You're loved. I enjoy being with you.* These messages shape a baby's self-esteem.

- **Provide babies with responsive care.**

Responsive care means matching your caregiving to what your baby needs. You help your baby feel secure when you respond to her cries and other communications—for example, picking your baby up when she lifts her arms in the air. Or, your 10-month-old might kick and grab to show you he really wants to hold his own spoon. You know that he's not able to feed himself, so you give him a baby spoon to hold in his hands while you continue feeding him with another. This is *responsive care* because you took the time to think about what the baby's behavior meant and figured out a way to support him.

- **Support babies' developing skills.**

Babies learn best when you let them play and explore while keeping them safe. They develop new skills when you give them *just enough* help so they can master a challenge without becoming overly frustrated.





For example, if you see a five-month-old trying to roll over, you may hold a toy to his side so that he reaches over with his body to grab it.

- **Get to know your baby.**

What does he like and dislike -- which toys are favorites -- what schedule works for him?

- **Build a collaborative relationship with your child's caregiver(s).**

Talk to your child's caregivers about her personality, what she likes to do, what calms her, what upsets her. Share your baby's usual daily schedule and typical activities and the words your family uses for important things like "bottle" and "blanket." Learning more about your baby helps caregivers meet your child's needs.

- **Be affectionate and nurturing.**

Touching, holding, comforting, rocking, singing and talking to your baby all send the message that he is special and loved. It's easy to be affectionate when babies are cute and cuddly, but it's important to nurture babies when they are difficult, fussy, crying a lot or colicky. When you can be loving and patient during the tough times, your baby learns he can trust you, and he feels safe and loved for who he is—no matter what. This makes them feel safe and makes it more likely they will learn to calm themselves as they grow.

- **Establish routines for your baby.**

Knowing what to expect helps babies feel safe, confident, and in control of their world. Try to keep daily routines in the same order and at the same time each day. For example, there may be a morning walk, then diaper change, then bottle, then stories.

- **Be a safe "home base."**

Watch how your child crawls away, then comes back to check-in with you. She wants to be sure you are still there and may be looking for encouragement to explore more.

The Second Year:

Young toddlers develop self-awareness—that they are separate from others and begin to see that other people have thoughts and feelings different from their own. Young toddlers are also becoming more and more interested in their peers, though at this age they usually don't play *with* other children, but next to or nearby.

- **Help your toddler become a confident problem-solver.**

Give your child some time to try to figure a problem out on his own—like how to get his rain boots on. When you see him get frustrated, give a little help to master the challenge. For example, you may line up the boots with the correct feet, and then suggest the child lean on a chair while he slides a foot in.

- **Praise the process, not just the result.**

Help children feel good about their efforts. When you notice your child's efforts (*you are working so hard on that puzzle, really thinking through where each piece fits*), it lets her know how important it is to keep trying.

- **Help children resolve conflict appropriately.**

Toddlers have little self-control. They want what they want when they want it, which means they're not very good at waiting. Developmentally, young children struggle with following rules. Patiently teach your toddler by showing them how to share. Set a kitchen timer to give them a visual reminder of how long they have to wait for their turn. Help them get involved in something else while waiting.

- **Help your child feel safe and secure.**

The world can seem unpredictable and scary to toddlers. Having a daily schedule makes her feel secure. Now they are walking, they find themselves in "strange" places (even in your house or backyard) without meaning to. They might fall more often as they master balance and coordination needed for walking. Encourage her to explore safely, and provide support and reassurance she needs.

The Third Year:

Toddlers love to say "No!" and at this age it is typical for toddlers to still struggle with sharing, turn-taking, and following rules because they have not yet mastered self-control. Toddlers have an explosion in pretend play, a critical aspect of development that builds language, thinking, and social skills.

- **Help your child learn to resolve conflict appropriately.**

Teach your child by calmly taking them through the process of resolving a conflict. [1] **Keep it simple.**

Explain what happened in as few words as possible in a calm, not-angry voice. *You pushed Justin because you wanted the broom back.*

[2] **Point out the consequences of the behavior:** *After you pushed Justin, he started to cry. It hurt. He felt sad and mad.*

[3] **Brainstorm better choice(s) your child can make next time.** Older 2-yr-olds may be able to offer some ideas on their own. Others will need suggestions, like using their words or asking for help from an adult.

- **Help your toddler understand her feelings.**

Use words to describe emotions: *Are you feeling sad and jealous that Carly got the cupcake you wanted? I know that's hard, but now you can choose the blue cupcake or the green one.* Teaching children words for emotions gives them the ability to talk about their feelings instead of acting them out. Use sock puppets or dolls to create a story about your child's frustrations or fears. Read books about feelings and talk about the pictures: *Which child looks mad? Which looks afraid?* To encourage empathy, ask your child to imagine how others are feeling: *You told Greta that she can't play ball with you. Look at her face now. How do you think she is feeling? Casey is feeling sad because his daddy just said good-bye. Let's see if he wants to read with us.*