Temperament and Your Child's Personality

Personality is determined by the interaction of temperament traits with the environment. Each person (including your child) comes with a factory installed wiring. How your child is wired can determine whether they will be easy or difficult to raise. How well their temperament fits with the environment and how well they are received by the people in the environment will determine how a child sees himself and others.

What is temperament?

Temperament is a set of in-born traits that organize the child's approach to the world. They are instrumental in the development of the child's distinct personality. These traits also determine how the child goes about learning about the world around him.

These traits appear to be relatively stable from birth. They are enduring characteristics that are actually never "good" or "bad." How they are received determines whether they are perceived by the child as being a bad or good thing. When parents understand the temperament of their children, they can avoid blaming themselves for issues that are normal for their child's temperament. Some children are noisier than other. Some are more cuddly than others. Some have more regular sleep patterns that others.

When parents understand how their child responds to certain situations, they an learn to anticipate issues that might present difficulties for their child. They can prepare the child for the situation or in other cases they may avoid a potentially difficult situation all together.

Parents can tailor their parenting strategies to the particular temperamental characteristics of the child. They can also avoid thinking that a behavior that reflects a temperament trait represents a pathological condition that requires treatment.

Parents feel more effective as they more fully understand and appreciate their child's unique personality.

When the demands and expectations of people and the environment are compatible with the child's temperament there is said to be a "goodness-of-fit." When incompatibility exists, you have what is known as a "personality conflict." Early on parents can work with the child's temperamental traits rather than in opposition to them. Later as the child matures the parents can help the child to adapt to their world by accommodating to their temperamental traits.

The 9 Temperament Traits

Classic child development research conducted by Doctors Chess and Thomas has identified 9 temperamental traits:

Activity Level: This is the child's "idle speed or how active the child is generally. Does the infant always wiggle, more squirm? Is the infant difficult to diaper because of this? Is the infant content

to sit and quietly watch? Does the child have difficulty sitting still? Is the child always on the go? Or, does the child prefer sedentary quiet activities? Highly active children may channel such extra energy into success in sports; may perform well in high-energy careers and may be able to keep up with many different responsibilities.

Distractibility: The degree of concentration and paying attention displayed when a child is not particularly interested in an activity. This trait refers to the ease with which external stimuli interfere with ongoing behavior. Is the infant easily distracted by sounds or sights while drinking a bottle? Is the infant easily soothed when upset by being offered alternate activity? Does the child become sidetracked easily when attempting to follow routine or working on some activity? High distractibility is seen as positive when it is easy to divert a child from an undesirable behavior but seen as negative when it prevents the child from finishing school work.

Intensity: The energy level of a response whether positive or negative. Does the infant react strongly and loudly to everything, even relatively minor events? Does the child show pleasure or upset strongly and dramatically? Or does the child just get quiet when upset? Intense children are more likely to have their needs met and may have depth and delight of emotion rarely experienced by others. These children may be gifted in dramatic arts. Intense children tend to be exhausting to live with.

Regularity: The trait refers to the predictability of biological functions like appetite and sleep. Does the child get hungry or tired at predictable times? Or, is the child unpredictable in terms of hunger and tiredness? As grown-ups irregular individuals may do better than others with traveling as well as be likely to adapt to careers with unusual working hours.

Sensory Threshold: Related to how sensitive this child is to physical stimuli. It is the amount of stimulation (sounds, tastes, touch, temperature changes) needed to produce a response in the child. Does the child react positively or negatively to particular sounds? Does the child startle easily to sounds? Is the child a picky eater or will he eat almost anything? Does the child respond positively or negatively to the feel of clothing? Highly sensitive individuals are more likely to be artistic and creative.

Approach/Withdrawal: Refers to the child's characteristic response to a new situation or strangers. Does the child eagerly approach new situations or people? Or does the child seem hesitant and resistant when faced with new situations, people or things? Slow-to-warm up children tend to think before they act. They are less likely to act impulsively during adolescence.

Adaptability: Related to how easily the child adapts to transitions and changes, like switching to a new activity. Does the child have difficulty with changes in routines, or with transitions from one activity to another? Does the child take a long time to become comfortable to new situations? A slow-to-adapt child is less likely to rush into dangerous situations, and may be less influenced by peer pressure.

Persistence: This is the length of time a child continues in activities in the face of obstacles. Does the child continue to work on a puzzle when he has difficulty with it or does he just move on to another activity? Is the child able to wait to have his needs met? Does the child react strongly when interrupted in an activity? When a child persists in an activity he is asked to stop, he is labeled as stubborn. When a child stays with a tough puzzle he is seen a being patient. The highly persistent child is more likely to succeed in reaching goals. A child with low persistence may develop strong social skills because he realizes other people can help.

Mood: This is the tendency to react to the world primarily in a positive or negative way. Does the child see the glass as half full? Does he focus on the positive aspects of life? Is the child generally in a happy mood? Or, does the child see the gall as half empty and tend to focus on the negative aspects of life? Is the child generally serious? Serious children tend to be analytical and evaluate situations carefully.

Is your child easy or difficult to raise?

Temperament is the innate behavior style of an individual that seems to be biologically determined. Although some experts feel that labeling a child too quickly as "difficult" may create a self-fulfilling prophecy of problematic parent-child interaction, knowing what kind of temperament your child has may make the difference between a happy and a troubled child - and between an accepting and frustrated parent. You can use the table below to get a rough idea on how easy or difficult your child is to raise.

Temperamental Traits	Easy	Difficult
Activity Level (how active the child is generally)	**Low**	**High**
Distractibility (degree of concentration and paying attention when child is not particularly interested)	**Low**	**High**
Intensity (how loud the child is)	**Low**	**High**
Regularity (the predictability of biological functions like appetite and sleep)	**Regular**	**Irregular**
Sensory Threshold (how sensitive the child is to physical stimuli: touch, taste, smell, sound, light)	**High**	**Low**
Approach / Withdrawal (characteristic responses of a child to a new situation or to strangers)	**Approach**	**Withdrawal**
Adaptability (how easily the child adapts to transitions and changes like switching to a new activity)	**Good**	**Poor**
Persistence (stubbornness, inability to give up)	**Low**	**High**
Mood (tendency to react to the world primarily in a positive or negative way)	**Positive**	**Negative**
If your child weighs more heavily on one side of the spectrum than the other, he may be a classic example of the easy or difficult child. However, if your child is in-between and his behavior presents you with problems, you may be in nee of some new management techniques.		

Coping With Your Child's Personality

Ever feel frustrated by your high-energy baby? What can you do about a child who screams himself silly when he doesn't get his own way? A youngster who gets overexcited when a playmate come over? The experts tell us that there's probably not a lot you can go about changing the way a child tends to reach if that tendency is inborn but there are ways you can help him manage his impulses better - and spare yourself lots of grief along the way.

Realize that your child's immature behavioral style is not your "fault" because temperament is biological not something he learned from you. Still it is within your power to help your child cope with his temperament - and eventually to understand himself better instead of feeling sorry for yourself for having a noisy, distractible or shy child. Learn to accept this as his nature and then develop a strategy to help him adapt in a socially acceptable way. Replace a victimized mind-set with an adult resolve to help your child ameliorate his difficulties. Above all, remember that all temperamental qualities can be shaped to work to a child's advantage if they are sensibly managed.

To become a "manager of your child's temperament, make sure that you step back from his objectionable behavior for a minute and remind yourself that his shrill shriek of excitement or his irregular sleeping habits are not deliberate reactions but one he can yet control. The key is to switch on the objective part of your mind rather than to become emotionally embroiled in his temperamental difficulties. Through this emotionally "neutral" stance, you'll be better able to help him modify his reactions because you'll be thinking rationally.

Develop specific plans ahead of time to cope with troublesome behavior and then enforce them in a sympathetic but consistently firm ways. If your child tend to get wild on family occasions or when he's with friends, be sensitive to this tendency and take steps to quiet it before it escalates. (Decide ahead if this activity is one he can handle. With younger children avoiding potential problem situations may be the best solution). With a baby you may want to tell your host that you will want to leave the party early. You can also take your child into a quiet room and sit with him until he falls asleep. Follow similar procedure with an older child, either by removing him from the activity, distracting him with something quieter such as a story hour or a snack or calling a "time out" period.

An infant with irregular biological rhythms will need special structuring from you so that he eventually learns to sleep through the night, to eat at the usual meal times and to control his bladder and bowel function. In this case, a doctor or child-behavior expert may be able to help to develop a schedule for your baby.

For an older child who resists going to sleep, you may have to make special distinctions between bedtime and "sleep-time." To help him settle down, you can insist that the youngster get into bed at a certain time but permit him to read or play quietly until he feels sleepy. In this way, you are regulating his schedule but still allowing him to relax at his own pace.

Learn to distinguish between behavior that is temperamentally induced and that which is learned. If a child knocks over your best vase by mistake because he is a high-energy child and was running gleefully through the living room, your response should be different than if he broke your vase deliberately.

In some instances you will probably be upset and may express your displeasure. But the action you pursue should be different. In the first case you may have to give some thought on how to prevent your child from running through the living room and remembering other ways he can work off his energy while in the house. In the second scenario, you will probably want to punish the child for his deliberate destruction of your personal property to impress upon him that this behavior is socially unacceptable. With temperament, the goal is always to manage rather than to systematically punish.

By the same token learn to distinguish between a tantrum that is temperamentally determined and one that is deliberately manipulative. Both may look the same because in both instances the child

is crying or screaming loudly but the reasons for them are different. A strong-willed and intense child may react to a disappointment with a tantrum but the parent should understand that in a sense the child really can't help it - that this is his innate behavioral reaction. This is in marked contrast to the less intense child who screams and cries in the same way when you say no because he has learned that such behavior will weaken your resolve and make your give into him. Becoming an expert on your child's temperament will help you distinguish between the two types of tantrums - and then you can react to the tantrum appropriately.

Finally remember that one of the most important jobs a parent can do is help his child develop self-esteem. That doesn't mean over-inflating his ego but rather helping him develop a positive sense of himself with a fair sense of his strengths and weaknesses. Understanding a child temperament is the first step toward enhancing his self-esteem because you will be able to deliver praise sensitively in accordance with his innate tendencies and help him build upon those traits in a positive way.

Parenting Strategies For Very Intense Children:

- Provide activities that are soothing such as warm bath, massage, water play, stories.
- Recognize cues that signal that intensity is rising.
- Help child learn to recognize cues that signal that intensity is rising.
- Use humor to diffuse intensity.
- Teach child to use time-out as a time to calm self-down.
- Avoid escalating intensity of child be reacting intensely to his/her behavior. Give calm, clear, brief feedback.

Parenting Strategies for Slow-to-Adapt Children:

- Establish clear routines.
- Prepare child by discussing plans for the day when routine changes.
- Prepare child for transitions.
- Give warnings a few minutes before transition from one activity to next occurs.
- Allow time for closure of one activity before going on to next.
- Stay aware of number of transitions required, and keep transitions to minimum if possible.