



## The Nine Traits of Temperament

### Activity Level

Activity refers to the child's physical energy. Is the child constantly moving, or does the child have a relaxing approach? A high-energy child may have difficulty sitting still in class, whereas a child with low energy can tolerate a very structured environment. The former may use gross motor skills like running and jumping more frequently. Conversely, a child with a lower activity level may rely more on fine motor skills, such as drawing and putting puzzles together. This trait can also refer to mental activity, such as deep thinking or reading—activities which become more significant as the person matures.

### Regularity

Regularity refers to the level of predictability in a child's biological functions, such as waking, becoming tired, hunger, and bowel movements. Does the child have a routine in eating and sleeping habits, or are these events more random? For example, a child with a high regularity rating may want to eat at 2 p.m. every day; whereas a child lower on the regularity scale may eat at sporadic times throughout the day.

### Adaptability

Adaptability refers to how long it takes the child to adjust to change over time (as opposed to an initial reaction). Does the child adjust to the changes in their environment easily, or is the child resistant? A child who adjusts easily may be quick to settle into a new routine, whereas a resistant child may take a long time to adjust to the situation.

### Approach or Withdrawal

This refers to how the child responds (whether positively or negatively) to new people or environments. Does the child approach people or things in the environment without hesitation, or does the child shy away? A bold child tends to approach things quickly, as if without thinking, whereas a cautious child typically prefers to watch for a while before engaging in new experiences.

### Physical Sensitivity

Sensitivity refers to how easily a child is disturbed by changes in the environment. This is also called **sensory threshold** or **threshold of responsiveness**. Is the child bothered by external stimuli like noises, textures, or lights, or does the child seem to ignore them? A sensitive child may lose focus when a door slams, whereas a child less sensitive to external noises will be able to maintain focus.



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### **Intensity of Reactions**

Intensity refers to the energy level of a positive or negative response. Does the child react intensely to a situation, or does the child respond in a calm and quiet manner? A more intense child may jump up and down screaming with excitement, whereas a mild-mannered child may smile or show no emotion.

### **Distractibility**

Distractibility refers to the child's tendency to be sidetracked by other things going on around them. Does the child get easily distracted by what is happening in the environment, or can the child concentrate despite the interruptions? An easily distracted child is engaged by external events and has difficulty returning to the task at hand, whereas a rarely distracted child stays focused and completes the task at hand.

### **Positive or Negative Mood**

Mood refers to the child's general tendency towards a happy or unhappy demeanor. All children have a variety of emotions and reactions, such as cheerful and stormy, happy and unhappy. Yet each child biologically tends to have a generally positive or negative outlook. A baby who frequently smiles and coos could be considered a cheerful baby, whereas a baby who frequently cries or fusses might be considered a stormy baby.

### **Persistence**

Persistence and attention span refer to the child's length of time on a task and ability to stay with the task through frustrations—whether the child stays with an activity for a long period of time or loses interest quickly.



## Charting Temperament Traits

Trait	Temperament	Scale
Activity	Can your child sit through reading a developmentally appropriate book or television show without wiggling?  (Are you able to sit through a long meeting or television show without moving or getting up?)	1-----2-----3-----4-----5  Low High
Regularity	How regular are eating, sleeping, and elimination (bowel movements) habits?	1-----2-----3-----4-----5  Irregular Regular
Adaptability	How quickly can your child adapt to new places, foods, or people?	1-----2-----3-----4-----5  Slow to adapt Adapts quickly
Approach/Withdrawal	How does your child react the first time you meet new people, tastes new foods, or go to new places?	1-----2-----3-----4-----5  Initial withdrawal Initial approach
Physical Sensitivity	How conscious is your child of changes in temperature, noise, or touch?	1-----2-----3-----4-----5  Not Sensitive Very Sensitive
Intensity of Reactions	How intense are the reactions to these changes?	1-----2-----3-----4-----5  Mild reaction High intensity
Distractibility	How easily distracted is your child?	1-----2-----3-----4-----5  Not distractible Very distractible
Positive or Negative Mood	How often is your child in a happy (good) mood, and how often is your child in a grouchy or fussy (bad) mood?	1-----2-----3-----4-----5  Negative mood Positive Mood
Persistence	How long does your child continue a difficult task?	1-----2-----3-----4-----5  Short attention span Long attention span



## Benefits of creating a “Goodness of Fit” for your children:

- You can avoid some of the recurring battles that take place within your home.
- You build a more trusting, respectful relationship with your children.
- Your children’s self-esteem is raised.

## Tips for creating a “Goodness of Fit” between a child and his/her parents and environment:

- Know and understand your children’s temperament and their usual way of reacting in situations.
- Know and understand your own temperament and your typical ways of responding to your children.
- Identify how your temperaments fit and don’t fit together. Do you tend to react mildly to things while your child has intense reactions? Are you both highly sensitive to sounds and tastes? Do you adapt quickly while your child has a tough time adapting to new routines?
- Consider how your reactions to your children affect their behavior. What is your response when your children’s temperament clashes with your expectations? How do your reactions impact the outcome of your interactions?
- Work to respond more sensitively and effectively to your children. Be aware of the language you use and learn to describe and re-frame some of the negative labels with positive labels.
- Look at the situation, including the physical environment and others’ temperaments, and assess how well or not so well it fits with your child’s temperament. Change schedules and physical surroundings to better fit your child’s temperament. For example, if you have a child that is highly active, plan a trip to the playground where the child can run and climb before you head out to the store to go shopping.
- Anticipate your child’s needs and reactions. Work together to plan for successful outcomes. For example, if your child is low on adaptability and slow to approach new situations, prepare him in advance for new situations by being as specific and detailed as you can about what he can expect.
- Help your children learn ways they can help themselves “fit” better in all environments. Teach your children about their temperament and about goodness of fit. Teach them what they can do to manage both.
- Parents can create a “goodness of fit” between their child and planned activities so that it becomes a win-win for everyone. This involves taking into account the child’s temperament and what he needs in order to feel comfortable in a particular setting. If a child typically gets stressed in crowded places, visits to stores can be made during their slowest hours.



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- Do not force a child who has difficulty talking to strangers to talk to new people or relatives they haven't seen in a while. Give them time to feel comfortable – this is being respectful of the child's temperament and can avoid a meltdown or the child feeling badly about himself.

### **Tune into your child's individuality:**

- Do not punish the child for temperamental style. If a child is shy, she should not be reprimanded for being hesitant toward a stranger. If the child adapts gradually, she shouldn't be punished for not obeying completely if her response is better than last time (moving in the right direction). If the child is intense she shouldn't be criticized for being loud when she feels upset, just as she isn't punished for being loud when she is happy. If a child is irregular, she shouldn't be punished for not being hungry at every meal or not ready to sleep at every bed time. Notice the times when things are going well. How are you reacting at the times when you and she are feeling good about each other? There are clues there about what the child needs.
- Recognize and accept the way the child really is. If parenting is stressful and your child doesn't act like the one next door, she may be "spirited" and need specialized parenting techniques. You may need to learn more about how to parent a spirited child than the parent next door.
- Recognize your feelings toward the child. It can be isolating to feel that you are frustrated rather than fulfilled as a parent, that you are stressed by parenting rather than energized by it, and that you sometimes wish that your child were different. Lots of other parents have these feelings. Find a way to discuss these feelings honestly. It will probably benefit your child also if you do.
- Be aware of your child's temperament and respect his or her uniqueness without comparing him or her to others or trying to change your child's basic temperament. Be aware of your own temperament and adjust your natural responses when they clash with your child's responses.
- Communicate. Explain decisions and motives. Listen to the child's points of view and encourage teamwork on generating solutions.
- Set limits to help your child develop self-control. Respect opinions but remain firm on important limits.
- Be a good role model because children learn by imitation.