

Nine Traits of Temperament

Scenario: Tom

Although Tom liked other children, Tom really preferred to be alone or with just one or two other children. Too much noise or activity could make Tom feel overwhelmed. While Tom's mother would have liked Tom to be around more children (she grew up in a large, chaotic household with many children), she understood that Tom needed something different. Thus, she would only invite one or two kids over for play dates, and she would make sure that there were some low-activity times during the visit. She found that by understanding Tom's needs, she was able to prevent temper tantrums or meltdowns. In fact, by meeting Tom's needs, she realized she was also meeting her own.

Activity Level - refers to motor activity and focuses on the proportion of active and inactive periods in the child's day. For example, an infant may kick and squirm a lot or may lie quietly. As a preschooler, a child may prefer to use gross motor skills predominately, such as running, or fine motor skills predominately, such as doing puzzles.

Regularity - refers to the degree of predictability of the timing of the child's biological functions, such as hunger, sleep-wake cycles, and elimination. As an infant, a child may have a bowel movement every day after breakfast or only a few times a week. As a preschooler, a child may prefer a big meal at lunch each day, or one may be unable to predict when he or she will be hungry.

Adaptability - is the long-term reaction or adjustment to change in such areas as foods, moving, or going to a new school. Babies and children may take a long time to adjust to changes, or they may adapt quickly to changes.

Approach or Withdrawal - refers to a child's response to new people, new toys, new settings; the response may be positive or negative. For example, an infant may smile at strangers and like new foods, or the child may have a more sober reaction to novelty. As a preschooler, he or she may join right in or may be initially shy.

Physical Sensitivity - refers to the amount of stimulation necessary to evoke a response in a child. An infant or a young child may respond strongly to moderate changes in such things as noise, room temperature, pain, odors, colors, and textures, or he or she may not be affected.

Intensity of Reactions - refers to the energy level of a response — whether it is

positive or negative. An infant may express his or her displeasure by mild fussing or by loud wails. As a preschooler, a child may smile quietly with pleasure or jump around and yell.

Distractibility - refers to how easily outside stimuli interfere with a child's ongoing activity. An infant may not be able to suck while nursing if his or her mother talks to him or her. As a child, he or she may not be able to finish one task before starting or joining another activity.

Positive or Negative Mood - refers to the child's mood — pleasant and friendly versus unpleasant, unhappy, and crying. An infant may generally smile and coo or may be irritable and cry. As a preschooler, the child may tend to be generally content or discontent about many issues and people.

Persistence (and attention span) - refers to the child's ability to continue an activity despite frustration and the length of time spent on the activity without interruption. An infant may give up easily or may continue trying to reach a toy or other item for a long time. A preschooler may lose interest quickly in toys or games or dressing himself. On the other hand, he or she may continue trying to make a toy work or trying to pull on a sock.

This handout was taken from the Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess. Temperament and Development. Brunner/Mazel, 1977.

Charting Temperament Traits

Trait	Temperament	Scale				
Activity	Can your child sit through reading a developmentally appropriate book or television show without wiggling?	1	2	3	4	5
		Low				High
Regularity	How regular are his or her eating, sleeping, and other 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				Quick
Approach/ Withdrawal	How does your child react the first time you meet new people, taste new foods, or go to new places?	1	2	3	4	5
		Withdrawal				Approach
Physical Sensitivity	How conscious is your child of changes in temperature, noise, or touch?	1	2	3	4	5
		Not				Very
Intensity of Reactions	How intense are the reactions to changes in routine?	1	2	3	4	5
		Mild				High
Distractibility	How easily distracted is your child?	1	2	3	4	5
		Not				Very
Positive or Negative Mood	How often is your child in a happy (positive) mood and how often is your child in a grouchy or fussy (negative) mood?	1	2	3	4	5
		Negative				Positive
Persistence	How long does your child continue a difficult task?	1	2	3	4	5
		Short				Long

Tips for “Goodness of Fit”

Tips for Creating a “Goodness of Fit” Between a Child and His or 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 do not fit together. Do you tend to react mildly, 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?
- Respond to your children more sensitively and effectively. 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 this environment 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 who is highly active, plan a trip to the playground where he or she can run and climb before you 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 or she 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 the situation can become a win-win for everyone. This involves taking into account the child’s temperament and recognizing what he or she needs in order to feel comfortable in a particular setting.
- If crowded places typically cause your child stress, then visit stores during their slowest hours, if possible.
- Do not force a child, who has difficulty talking to strangers, to talk to new people or relatives he or she has not seen in a while. Give him or her time to feel comfortable – this is being respectful of the child’s temperament and can avoid a meltdown or the child feeling badly about him or herself.

This handout was taken from the [Center for Parenting Education Website](http://centerforparentingeducation.org/library-of-articles/child-development/understanding-goodness-of-fit) at <http://centerforparentingeducation.org/library-of-articles/child-development/understanding-goodness-of-fit>