Temperament

1 What kind of temperament does my baby have?

Every child is born with his own individual way of approaching the world—also known as “temperament.” Temperament shapes a child’s behavior and development in significant ways, so understanding a child’s temperament is very important for nurturing her healthy development. For example, if you know that a child has a difficult time with changes, you can anticipate and understand why drop-off time in the morning is so difficult for her. You might create a good-bye routine (like a special song and hug) that is especially comforting to your child.

2 There is no right or wrong, better or worse temperament

Children don’t choose their temperament. It is simply how they’re wired. It is very important for children to be accepted for who they are. It is true, though, that some temperaments are easier to handle than others. An intense, reactive child can be more difficult to soothe than a more laid-back, flexible child. A child who is very shy and slow-to-warm-up may require more time and support to feel comfortable joining a group of children, compared to an extroverted peer.

Remember that there is no “right” temperament. The goal isn’t to change the child, but to help her thrive by nurturing her strengths and providing support when needed. By watching and learning from your child, you can begin to help her adapt, learn, and feel more confident in the world.

3 Listed below are five different temperament areas to consider:

SOCIABILITY

This refers to the way that your child usually responds to new things, people, and events. Some children are “slow-to-warm” and cautious around people they don’t know. They often need time and support from trusted caregivers before they feel comfortable enough to interact. “Glad-to-meet-you” children approach new people and situations eagerly and seek out connections by smiling, cooing, talking to, and looking people in the eye. These children may prefer lots of social interaction throughout the day.

COPING WITH CHANGE

Children vary in how they cope with and tolerate both everyday changes, such as a new jacket, and larger changes, such as moving to a new house. Some children find changes particularly difficult. Even though young children are well known for being inflexible about their routines, some children seem to be even more dependent on them to feel safe and secure. These “keep-it-the-same” children tend to react to even the smallest of changes—a new nipple on the bottle, a new food on their plate, or a slight change in a regular routine. They thrive on daily routines to feel safe and secure, and they need lots of time and support to get comfortable in new surroundings, or with new people.
ACTIVITY LEVEL
Some children are not action-oriented. They are “watchers,” and are happy to hang out and play quietly. These children prefer to take the world in by looking or listening. They often enjoy exploring with their hands (using their fine motor skills) instead of their large muscles (arms and legs), and might focus their attention on activities like puzzles. Other children are “movers and shakers” who seem to always be “on the go.” They like to reach out, grab, crawl, and explore. These children love spaces that offer lots of opportunity for movement and tend to reach out for and touch anything they can get their hands on. They love to move and aren’t “bad” or “wild” or “out of control,” but they may need lots of supervision.

EMOTIONAL INTENSITY AND REACTIVITY
Children vary in their emotional intensity. Some children are less intense and reactive. They tend to be quiet and rarely fuss, sleep more than average, and possibly get on a “schedule” sooner than others. They show their emotions with only slight changes in facial expression, tone of voice, or body posture, and need a high level of stimulation to get interested or engaged. On the other hand, children who are “big reactors” tell the world how they feel in voices and actions that are loud and clear. They tend to express their feelings with great intensity—by squealing with delight or shouting in anger. They also tend to react intensely to minor irritations like an itchy tag on a T-shirt or an unpleasant smell or taste.

FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE
Children who are “easily frustrated” tend to get very upset the minute something doesn’t go their way. They have a difficult time waiting for attention or help and give up quickly when faced with a challenge. When they fall apart, let them know that you appreciate how difficult it can be: “Puzzles are hard! It makes you so mad when the bear won’t fit in the space.” Then become their coach—help them think through solutions without doing the work for them. Children who are persistent usually keep trying when faced with a challenge, are slower to “lose it” when they don’t get their way, and can often tolerate waiting for their needs to be met. As these children grow, you may need to let them know that everyone needs help sometimes and that you are available. Sometimes, they get so much positive feedback for being independent that it’s difficult for them to ask for help when they do need it.

Don’t forget about you
Remember that you have a temperament, too. In fact, you might want to note where you and your child fall on each temperament characteristic to see how close or far apart you are. If you are temperamentally different from your baby, you may sometimes need to change your approach or your expectations to create a “good fit” between you and your baby. This “good fit” has been shown to support your baby’s healthy development. For example, you may enjoy sitting and reading and want to share this activity with your child, but if your child has a high activity level, you may find that it’s off to the playground again! Adjusting your approach and expectations—sharing a story while your child plays in the same room with you—might be an enjoyable compromise for both of you.