Stanislaus County Office of Education

Child/Family Services

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Resource & Referral Handout

Nine Temperament Traits of Infants and Toddlers

Temperamental traits and their handling

In describing the nine different traits, the extremes in each case are emphasized. For example, high levels of energy or sensitivity versus low levels—because children with these traits are the ones most likely to need special attention or handling. This document provides typical examples of how very young children express such traits and suggests the best caregiving approaches to take.

The majority of children display temperament at a level somewhere in between the extremes of temperament, and these children will fit into home child care routines fairly easily. In this sense, temperament is similar to intelligence; that is, children of low average or very high intelligence may require special attention, and those of average or slightly superior intelligence will adapt to the routine curriculum without great difficulty.

1. **Activity level**—amount of movement and bodily activity

   High activity

   This is the child who is highly active, prefers games and play with a lot of movement, kicks and splashes in the bath, likes to run around, gets restless and distressed if required to sit quietly in one spot for long periods. Give a child with this level of activity opportunities for active play. If the group is engaged in some quiet activity let this type of child move around from time to time.

   Low activity

   This is the child who prefers quiet games and can sit calmly looking at picture books or coloring for long periods of time. Because this child moves slowly, she or he is sometimes teased as a slowpoke. Expect that a child with this level of activity will require extra time to get things done, such as dressing or moving from one place to another.

2. **Biological rhythms**—Regularity or irregularity of such functions as sleep-wake cycle, hunger, and bowel elimination.

   Regularity

   The regular child sleeps through the night, takes a regular nap, eats about the same amount from day to day, and has a bowel movement about the same time each day. This child presents no problem with feeding or sleeping schedules and is usually easily toilet trained.

   Irregularity

   In contrast to the regular child, this child varies in sleep habits and hunger patterns, and may awaken several times at night. The irregular child's big meal may be lunch one day and dinner the next, and his bowel movements are unpredictable. Accept this child's irregular nap and feeding schedules. The child can be trained to sleep through the night if he's not picked up every time he cries. Toilet training will

usually take longer and may not succeed until the child learns to be consciously aware of the internal sensation that signals a bowel movement.

3. **Approach or withdrawal**—How the child responds to a new situation or other stimulus

Approach

The approacher responds positively to a new food by swallowing it, reaches for a new toy, smiles at strangers and when first joining a play group, plunges right in. Such a child presents few problems to the caregiver, except when this responsiveness is combined with a high level of activity. Then the approacher may run impulsively to climb a new high rock or jungle gym that she or he cannot really manage or try to explore a potentially dangerous object.

Withdrawal

Typically cautious about exploring new objects, the withdrawer is likely to push away a new toy or to spit out new food the first few times. Around strangers or when first taken to a new place, the child may fuss or cry and strain to get away. Be patient with these initial negative reactions. Pressuring the child to make an immediate positive adjustment only increases her or his discomfort and makes it harder for the child to accept new people, foods, objects and activities. Instead, small repeated exposures to the unfamiliar lets the child gradually overcome his or her early reluctance.

4. **Adaptability**—How quickly or slowly the child adapts to a change in routine or overcomes an initial negative response

High adaptability

The quickly adaptive child adjusts easily to the family's move to a new home or a visit to a strange place. This child accepts new food that was first rejected after only a few trials, is agreeable to changes in mealtimes and sleeping schedules. Occasionally, the youngster may give in too early to unreasonable requests for change, such as a playmate changing the rules in the middle of the game. The quickly adaptive child may benefit by encouragement to "stick to your guns."

Low adaptability

By contrast, the slowly adaptive child takes a long time to adapt to change or to accept something new she or he originally rejected. Such a child is sometimes misjudged as stubborn or willfully uncooperative. A more accurate term would be cautious. Your approach should be the same as for the withdrawing child—be patient, give the child a number of exposures to the change, and encourage the child when she or he begins to show signs of adjusting. Pressure to make such a child adapt very quickly will only boomerang and result in the opposite effect.

5. **Quality of mood**—The amount of pleasant, cheerful, and openly friendly behavior (positive mood) as contrasted with fussing, crying, and openly showing unfriendliness (negative mood)

Positive mood

Smiling and laughing often, the child whose mood is positive is easily pleased and shows it openly. Fussing and crying are infrequent. This positive mood usually causes positive responses in adults, who find it easy to care for such children.

Negative mood

The child whose mood is negative tends to fuss or complain a lot, even at trivial discomforts, and cry before going to sleep. The child may show little or no open expression of pleasure, even at games or other events that please, but rather will have a deadpan expression. Be sure to acknowledge such a child. While indicating awareness of the child's fussing or complaining, respond cheerfully to her or him. You may find to your surprise that, although the child gives no outward evidence of pleasure at some special events, such as an expedition to the zoo, the child later reports it to her or his parents or friends as an exciting, happy event.

6. **Intensity of reactions**—The energy level of mood expression, whether it is positive or negative

Low intensity

The low-intensity child expresses both pleasure and discomfort in a low-key way. If happy, this child may smile or say quietly that she or he is pleased. If upset, the child may whine a little or fuss, but not loudly. It is easy to misjudge and miss what is going on inside the child if you take the mild reactions as evidence that he is not really displeased or upset. Remember that mild expressions may mask strong emotions. Pay careful attention to such expressions, and take seriously the feelings behind them.

High intensity

By contrast, the high-intensity child expresses her feelings with great intensity. When happy, this child bubbles and laughs. When upset, she cries loudly and may even have a tantrum. In this case, you have an opposite task—to evaluate objectively whether the issue is important or trivial and rather than being guided solely by the intense reactions of the child.

7. **Sensitivity threshold**—The sensitivity of the child to potentially irritating stimuli

Low threshold

Loud noises, bright lights, a wet or soiled diaper, or sudden changes in temperature may easily upset the child with a low threshold. This child may not be able to tolerate tight socks or clothing with rough texture. Be aware of and attend to those reactions; don't try to change them.

High threshold

The child with a high threshold is not bothered by the same kind of stimuli as the child with a low threshold. Check regularly to see if the infant has a wet or soiled diaper to avoid diaper rash. Otherwise, this child may be content to suffer the diaper irritation because the child's high threshold keeps her or him from feeling irritated and uncomfortable.

8. **Distractibility**—The ability of some unexpected stimulus such as the ringing of a telephone or someone entering the room to distract a child from an activity like feeding or playing

High distractibility

The attention of a highly distractible child may be diverted by a sound as quiet as a softly closing door. One parent observed that half the food went into the child's ear because she constantly turned her head at small noises or glimpses of movement. In the early childhood period, the tendency can be an asset to the caregiver. Showing her a toy or other attractive object can easily distract the child who is fussing at being dressed or is poking at an electric outlet. In older childhood, however, when persistent concentration on a task like homework is welcomed, high distractibility may not be such a desirable trait.

Low distractibility

The child who is not easily distracted tends to persist with an activity despite other noises, conversations, and people around her. This is desirable at certain times, such as feeding or dressing, when the child's full attention makes her cooperative. But low distractibility creates a problem if the child is intent on trying to reach a hot stove and will not be easily diverted; the child may have to be removed from the risk.

9. **Persistence and attention span**-Two closely related traits; persistence refers to the length of time that a child will stay with a difficult activity without giving up, and attention span describes how long the child will concentrate before his interest shifts.

High persistence

The highly persistence child with a long attention span will continue to be absorbed in what he is doing for long periods of time. In the early childhood years, the highly persistent child is often easy to manage because once absorbed in an activity, the child does not demand your attention. However, the child may get upset and even have a tantrum if he is forced to quit in the middle of an activity—for example, at bedtime, mealtime, or departure time. In such cases, warn the child in advance if time is limited, or you may decide to prevent the child from starting an activity that will have to be ended abruptly. The highly persistent child may also keep badgering to get something he wants, even after a firm refusal.

Low persistence

The child with low persistence and a short attention span will not stick with a task that is difficult or requires a long period of concentration. If the bead does not go on the string right away, or if the peg does not slip into the hole after a few pokes, the child will give up and move on to something else. This child presents few caregiving problems in the early stages of childhood. Later, however, a short attention span and lack of persistence make learning at school and home difficult.

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