

Tuning in to Temperament

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 his 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 him. You might talk with his parent(s) about ways to make this morning ritual easier. For example, his mother might create a good-bye routine (like a special song and hug) that is especially comforting for her child.

Children Can Adapt

A child’s behavior and temperament are shaped by her experiences, including her interactions with you. For example, children who are slow-to-warm-up to new people and experiences can become more comfortable in these situations when their parents and caregivers slowly and sensitively help them adapt.

There Is No Right or Wrong, Better or Worse Temperament

Temperament is neither something a child chooses nor something that parents create in their child. 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 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.

Remember, 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 each child, you can begin to help each adapt, learn, and feel more confident in the world.

Temperament Characteristics

There are four primary temperament characteristics, which are:

- Emotional intensity and reactivity
- Activity level
- Sociability
- Coping with change
- Frustration tolerance



Tuning in to Temperament: Sociability

Sociability describes how children approach social situations and interactions.

Some children are cautious around people they don't know. They often

- need time and support from trusted caregivers before they feel comfortable enough to interact and
- may be very happy to play on their own or with just a small group of familiar friends or adults.

For the children in your care who are slow-to-warm-up, try the following strategies:

- **Think of yourself as a safe home base.** Introduce the child to new people from the safety of your arms. Place her on your lap near another child and talk about what the other child is doing in a soothing, reassuring voice. Communicate positive feelings toward others nonverbally. Use your facial expressions and body language. Children look to you for cues.
- **Pair a slow-to-warm-up child with another child** who is a bit more outgoing, but who will not overwhelm him. Helping him feel comfortable with one child at a time will help him eventually feel more at ease with the larger group.

Children who approach new people—adults and children—eagerly usually

- seek out connections with new people by smiling, cooing, talking to them, and looking them in the eye and
- give off a sense that they are open and easygoing, which brings about warm, positive responses from those they meet.

For the glad-to-meet-you kids, try the following strategies:

- **Provide lots of opportunity for social interaction.** The glad-to-meet-you child thrives on it. Visits to the park, the public library, free local children's events, and even trips to the supermarket will be fun opportunities to people watch, connect with others, and chat.
- **Be ready to step in when needed.** Even the most sociable child will sometimes need help resolving an argument or soothing hurt feelings. Watch for well-intended over-enthusiasm. Sometimes, children get so excited to be with their friends that they can knock another toddler over during a hug or even bite another child. Help toddlers learn to express their excitement in acceptable ways.



Tuning in to Temperament: 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;
- 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/engaged.

For the “low reactors” in your care, try the following strategies:

- **Create interactive games.** Try activities, such as rolling a ball or passing a rattle back and forth, that involve taking turns so that the child remains engaged.
- **Get her attention.** Play music with a dynamic beat and dance together. Go to the park and try some safe, rough-and-tumble play. Use a dramatic voice while you read together.

On the other hand are children who are “big reactors”. They tell the world how they feel in voices and actions that are loud and clear. They tend to

- express their feelings with great intensity (e.g., showing happiness by squealing with delight and expressing anger by shouting, throwing things, hitting, or biting) and
- react to physical stimulation intensely (e.g., they cannot tolerate an itchy tag on a T-shirt or an unpleasant smell or taste).

For the “big reactors” in your care, try the following strategies:

- **Use softer music and lighting.** Keep playtime fun, but not overwhelming. Let the child decide whether he wants to participate in sensory activities like finger painting or playing with shaving cream.
- **Offer physical comfort when the child is distressed.** Hold her close, massage her back, rock her. Show that you understand her by naming her feelings: “I know it’s hard for you to be in crowded, noisy places.” Or, “I know you get s-o-o-o sad sometimes.” Don’t punish the child for her strong reactions—that is just who she is. Do help her to calm down and feel safe and secure. Then show her ways she *can* express her feelings.

Tuning in to Temperament: Frustration Tolerance

Patience and persistence describe how a child copes with frustration and how likely she is to stick with a problem or challenge in order to find a solution.

Children who are “easily frustrated” tend to

- get very upset the minute something doesn’t go their way,
- have a difficult time waiting for attention or help, and
- give up quickly when faced with a challenge.

For the children in your care who have a low frustration tolerance, try the following strategies:

- **Help children learn to wait.** While they wait, talk to them about what you are doing. For example, you might say, “I’m heating up your bottle right now.” Or, “I will help you in a minute. I will finish feeding Mikey and then help you with that toy.”
- **Help children cope with frustration.** 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. Suggest or demonstrate strategies for solving whatever problem they are facing. One good idea is to break the challenge into manageable parts: “Why don’t you put your thumb in the mitten first? Then we will work together to get each of your other fingers in the glove.”
- **Use humor.** This can reduce tension. For example, you yell at the block that has fallen: “You silly block! You just won’t stay on the tower! Well, we’re not giving up!”

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.

For the children in your care who are persistent, try the following strategies:

- **Join in their play.** It’s easy to let persistent children play alone for long periods because they are less demanding. But they still need and benefit from your time and attention.
- **As they grow, let the children know that everyone needs help sometimes and that you are available.** Sometimes, children get so much positive feedback for being independent that it’s difficult for them to ask for help when they do need it.
- **Look for fun and challenging activities** that will help persistent children build and expand their skills. Since these children can tolerate frustration more easily, “stretching” activities that are difficult but achievable can be enriching and expand their learning. For example, give a toddler a collection of different-sized cardboard boxes and ask her to build the tallest tower she can.



Tuning in to Temperament: Coping With Change

Children vary in how they *cope with and tolerate both everyday changes*, like a new jacket, *and larger changes*, like 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;
- thrive on daily routines to feel safe and secure (They have more difficulty making transitions such as between lunch and naptime.); and
- need lots of time and support to get comfortable in new surroundings or with new people.

For the children in your care who prefer to keep it the same, try the following strategies:

- **Use familiar objects, like a stuffed animal, to ease anxiety during transitions such as morning drop-off.** You can also let the child have some control over the transition. Ask him if he wants to kick the ball one more time before leaving the park.
- **Ease into new activities.** Talk about new activities first before doing them in order to allow this child to get comfortable. Then offer advance notice when an activity is about to end: “When this book is finished, we’re leaving the library and going home.”

Other children “go with the flow.” They tend to

- find new jackets, new friends, new foods, and new babysitters interesting and adapt pretty well wherever you take them. They are usually not upset by changes to routines. They are okay even when their nap is pushed a little late or if they don’t get their favorite cup for lunch.

For the children in your care who go with the flow, try the following strategies:

- **Offer a variety of experiences.** Try a new park, check out the local pool for water play, or visit the library for story hour. Let them know about new situations and activities ahead of time. Children who enjoy new things also enjoy talking about them and looking forward to them.
- **Be sensitive to their signals.** When a child is easygoing, we can sometimes take for granted that any change is okay. Offer extra support during the times when a child is having trouble with a transition.



Tuning in to Temperament: Activity Level

Activity level describes to what extent a child uses movement and physical skills to learn and explore the world.

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,
- prefer exploring with their hands (using their fine motor skills) instead of their large muscles (arms and legs), and
- focus their attention intensively on an activity such as working to get a puzzle piece in place.

For the watchers in your care, try the following strategies:

- **Respect his pace and style.** Offer him lots of opportunities to play with the things that he enjoys—for example, books, dress-up clothes, puzzles, building blocks, toy figures, and so forth.
- **Add movement to activities she already enjoys.** Hold a favorite toy a little beyond her easy reach or play music while you are cleaning up—it’s easy to shift from listening to dancing.

Other children are “movers and shakers” who seem to always be “on the go”—they like to reach out, grab, crawl, and explore. Movers and shakers

- love spaces that offer lots of opportunity for movement;
- tend to reach out for and touch anything they can get their hands on and may need lots of supervision; and
- aren’t “bad” or “wild” or “out of control.” They just love to move.

For the children in your care who are movers and shakers, try the following strategies:

- **Offer lots of opportunities for safe, active exploration.** Baby proof your entire home. Create obstacle courses with pillows on the floor. Play hide and seek, freeze tag, and other active games. Have him help you with everyday activities like setting the table for lunch.
- **Don’t expect children to lie or sit still for long.** Let them stand for a diaper change; allow them to turn the pages or act out the story when you read a book; or give them extra time to wind down before naptime.