

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids: A Letter for Parents by the NYU Child Study Center



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TUNING IN TO YOUR CHILD'S TEMPERAMENT

What is temperament?

Temperament is a consistent reaction style that a person exhibits across situations. A child's temperament emerges soon after birth, and aspects of temperament are thought to last over the course of a person's lifetime. Of course, the interactions between a child's temperament and the environments that the child experiences play an important part in determining how a child will develop over time.

What are examples of different types of temperament?

Many infants, but not all, fall into one of the following three temperamental categories:

- Easy – Infants with easy temperaments can be described as adapting easily to their surroundings, approaching new situations without fear and generally displaying a mild positive mood. This is the most common infant temperament.
- Difficult – Infants with difficult temperaments can be described as adapting slowly to their surroundings, withdrawing from new situations and displaying intense moods. These infants are often described as fussy and they cry more often than infants with easy temperaments.
- Slow to Warm Up – These infants are described as adapting slowly to their surroundings but displaying positive interest once they get used to their environment. These infants can also be fussy but they tend to have milder negative moods than infants described as difficult.

Temperaments in older children are often described as falling along a continuum along the following four dimensions:

- Activity – Refers not surprisingly to the child's tendency to move around and actively engage with things in their environment. Children who prefer quiet non-physical activities are low on this dimension. Children who prefer more boisterous physical activities are high on the activity dimension.
- Approach/Withdrawal – Refers to a child's first reaction to new people or situations. Children falling on the approach end of this continuum enter new situations easily and enthusiastically. Children falling on the withdrawal end of this continuum are shy when meeting new people and may need a lot of encouragement to enter new situations.
- Task Persistence – Refers to a child's tendency to stick with a task until it is completed. A child with high task persistence will usually complete age appropriate tasks such as homework or crafts projects even if interrupted. A child with low task persistence will have difficulty completing projects especially if interrupted or placed in environments with many distractions.
- Negative Reactivity – Refers to a child's tendency to become upset by life situations. Children high on this dimension are sometimes described as easily upset or very emotional. Children low on this dimension are often described as easy going and not likely to be upset by new or difficult situations.

Is it a parent's fault if a child has a "difficult" temperament?

No, most scientists who study temperaments believe that a child is born with a certain temperament or style of reacting to the world. All children are unique individuals. Just as some children are born with the potential to be more talented than others in certain areas like sports or music, some children are born with a tendency to more physically active or to become more easily upset by challenging situations than other children.

Is one temperament better than others?

No, each type of temperament has advantages and disadvantages depending on the situation. A child who tends to withdraw from new situations will be less likely to impulsively enter a dangerous situation. Our society tends to reward task persistence but sometimes a child can become too focused on a task and waste time and energy trying to do something that is relatively unimportant.

Even infants described as having a “difficult” temperament are described as difficult because their parents find it more challenging to care for a child that adapts more slowly than because there is anything wrong with a child who takes more time to get used to her surroundings. Problems *can* arise if there is a consistent mismatch between a child’s temperament and his environment or if parents have unrealistic expectations of the child.

How should parents respond to children with different temperaments?

The best thing a parent can do help a child reach her potential is to observe her natural tendencies and preferences and value those characteristics. Parents can then structure their child’s environment and their reactions to their child in a way that fits their child’s talents and personality. Of course, it is a parent’s responsibility to help a child develop new skills and to learn to be flexible in situations that may make the child uncomfortable. The best way to help children develop new skills is to start slowly. A parent should observe what the child can do comfortably and then introduce the child to slightly more challenging tasks. The parent should provide encouragement and guidance to the child as he attempts the more difficult tasks. Following are some examples:

A four-year-old might be shy and unwilling to interact with other children at the playground. A parent might be able to arrange to meet another parent and child at the playground. The parent can introduce the two children and encourage her child to play with her new peer. Once the child is comfortable playing with one or two friends her parent can take her to the playground and quietly coach her on how to ask a child she doesn’t know to play.

A 10-year-old might have a lot of trouble completing his homework. To help the child develop more task persistence a parent can help the child break up his assignments into smaller tasks and praise him as he finishes each small task. The parent can point out how much progress he is making towards completing the whole homework assignment. This will help the child develop a realistic sense of when the task will end and feel a sense of accomplishment rather than a sense of dread that he will never finish.

Most importantly, parents need to be patient with themselves and their children and learn to treasure their child’s unique personality.

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ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention, and treatment of child and adolescent psychiatric disorders. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with various disorders including anxiety, depression, ADHD, learning or attention difficulties, Autism, eating disorders, and trauma and stress-related symptoms.

We offer a number of treatment studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916 or visit www.aboutourkids.org/research/studies.html.

If you or your child needs immediate assistance, mental health professionals are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling 1-800-LIFENET (1-800-543-3638), a program of the Mental Health Association of New York City. Help is available in several languages: Spanish: 1-877-298-3373, Chinese: 1-877-990-8585. For other languages, ask for a translator.

For further information, guidelines, and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center’s website, AboutOurKids.org.

AboutOurKids.org

Giving Children Back Their Childhood

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