

Working with Your Child's Temperament

By: Christine Vander Wielen, MSW, CAPSW

In 1956, a longitudinal research study was begun by Doctors Alexander Thomas, Stella Chess and Herbert Birch of New York University. They studied 133 individuals from infancy to adulthood by observing how the individuals interacted and responded to their environment. Out of this study, the researchers defined nine characteristics that make up temperament. It was observed that a person's temperament was in large part present at birth and remained relatively stable throughout a person's lifetime. Temperament is not set in stone and there can be some shift in degree of the characteristics but overall temperament remains generally stable.

The nine characteristics of temperament and the rating scale are as follows:

1. Persistence: How persistent is the child? How long will the child stay at a task that is difficult? Low---Moderate---High

2. Intensity: How intensely does the child react to situations? Does the child react strongly to situations, either positive or negative? Or does the child react calmly and quietly? Low---Moderate---High

3. Regularity: How regular is the child's eating and sleeping habits? Is the child regular in eating and sleeping habits or somewhat haphazard? Regular—Variable—Irregular

4. Distractibility: Is the child easily distracted from what they are doing? Does the child go from one uncompleted task to another? Low---Moderate---High

5. Energy/ Activity Level: How active or energetic is the child? Is the child always moving or are they more sedentary? Can the child settle down when necessary? Low---Moderate---High

6. Sensory Threshold: How sensitive is the child to outside stimuli? Is the child bothered by loud noises, bright lights, textures, clothing, and food? Low---Moderate---High

7. Adaptability: Are transitions easy or stressful? Can the child adjust to change in routines or plans easily? Low---Moderate---High

8. Reactivity: How does the child move into new situations and meet new people? This is also referred to as approach/withdraw: Does the child "never meet a stranger" or tend to shy away from new people and situations? Low---Moderate---High

9. Mood: Does the child express a negative outlook or is the child generally a positive person? Does the child's mood shift easily or is the child generally even tempered? Mild—Moderate---Extreme

Children are hard wired in how they respond and interact with their environment. It is beneficial for parents to know their own temperament and their child's temperament in order to best work with their child's temperament. Clashes between parents and children may be a clash of temperaments not a clash between right and wrong. To listen to the five part radio series with Christine Vander Wielen and Lynda Savage discussing temperament and giving practical advice to parents on how to work with their child's temperament visit www.pfl.org.

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P.O. Box 1676, Appleton, WI 54912 (920) 720-8920

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