



by Karen Stephens

# Discover Unique Temperament to Better Understand Children

A perplexed parent laments, “My kids are as different as night and day. You’d never guess they’re from the same family!” I’ve heard parents make that observation many times. Inborn temperament is at the root of the matter.

Research tells us a person’s unique personality isn’t an either/or proposition. It doesn’t come just from biology or just from parenting; it stems from both. Before birth, genes, hormones, and chemicals mix so that every child has an individual approach — or temperament — for dealing with the world. It can be influenced by parents and others, but basic temperament is for a lifetime.

Research has identified a number of key temperament indicators. They don’t exist in isolation, but instead influence each other. All traits have their positives and negatives; no one trait is the “right” one or necessarily easier to respond to as a parent.

- **Regularity:** The regularity of biological functions, such as sleep patterns, hunger and elimination. Some kids are right on the clock; others are all over the map.
- **Sensory Awareness:** How sensitive children are to sensory input. Kids vary in perceiving pain, texture, taste, smell, sound, and light.
- **Activity Level:** Activity level ranges from low activity where children prefer calm, sedentary activity to fast-paced, big, impulsive movement.
- **Adaptability:** How flexible and agreeable a child is — or is not — to the ideas, plans, and directions of others. How well a child does or does not *go with the flow*.
- **Approach:** A child’s typical first reaction to a new experience, person, or change in environment. Children may love novelty or be slower to warm up.
- **Distractibility:** How well a child can focus and concentrate. Some children can concentrate amidst television and radio noise. Others have their attention stolen by a butterfly outside the window.
- **Emotional Sensitivity:** The degree of sensitivity to the emotions of self as well as others. Children can be oblivious to emotions or hyper-sensitive to them.
- **Intensity:** The amount of effort a child puts into expressing his/her emotions. Some children use *in your face* boldness. Other children are more mild and have to be coaxed to share their feelings or opinions.
- **Mood:** How positive and cooperative a child is, versus how combative, sullen, whiney, or unfriendly. Some kids have a naturally sunny disposition; others are more negative and skeptical. Some see a cup as half empty — others half full.
- **Persistence or Frustration Tolerance:** The length of time a child will — or will not — stick to a task in the face of frustration. Some kids persist long after it makes sense to do so; others give up at the drop of a hat.

Those are the basic 10 variables in describing temperament. To make things simpler, children’s temperament is often referred to as easy, slow-to-warm up, or difficult. All three can pop up in the same family. Which temperament best describes your child?

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**Easy** children are regular and predictable in routines such as eating, sleeping, toileting, alertness, and cuddling times. Easy kids are flexible, adaptable, and generally accommodating. They have a chipper disposition. They are friendly and slow to rile or to become pessimistic. Their enthusiastic, outgoing attitude can lead them to leap too quickly into new experiences.

**Slow-to-warm-up** children are distinguished by their cautious nature and *wait and see* attitude. Given time to *warm-up* at their own pace, they gradually adjust to new circumstances. Unfortunately, these children are often labeled as “shy.” In truth, they are usually only “shy at first.” Once they get to know people and trust in a situation’s safety, they can be as outgoing and friendly as the next child.

**“Difficult”** or **“spirited”** children are irregular in routines related to sleep, eating, and alertness. They are often fussy and picky. As infants, it’s hard to predict what type of cuddling and eye contact they will enjoy, much less when and for how long. They can be extremely sensitive to one or more senses — touch, taste, scent, sound, or light. When encountering new experiences they can be negative, preferring to withdraw rather than to interact or cooperate. Unexpected changes — even small ones — can throw them off kilter for a whole day. Such children intensely express their feelings — especially when resisting someone else’s ideas. They easily lose control of their behavior.

## Responding to Your Child’s Temperament

I bet you’ve spied your child in that list. As you respond to your child’s temperament, work *with the grain* of their innate make up, rather than against it. You’ll become a more nurturing, compassionate parent who builds children’s self esteem. There’s a bonus for parents, too. Kids who feel accepted and supported are more respectful and cooperative. That makes family life easier for everyone! Here are some tips:

- Focus on the positive side of temperament. While difficult, intense persistence is maddening in the candy aisle, it can be a wonderful trait in an environmental activist or defense lawyer when a child grows up. And a slow-to-warm-up child may be the good listening therapist or concert pianist the next decade needs.
- Coach an easy child to look carefully before becoming an over-eager, unquestioning joiner. (This is especially important when kids face peer pressure.)
- Avoid unflattering comparisons. “Why can’t you be more like your brother/sister?” erodes confidence. Honor everyone’s uniqueness.
- Cue into activity level. High energy kids need regular boisterous play time. Low energy kids need quiet times for reflection and refilling emotional reserves.
- Cue into child’s *alert* times. Plan energy-demanding activities during your child’s up times.
- Pace daily errands according to your child’s rhythms. Be prepared with juice and crackers for kids unable to predict hunger. Know where bathrooms are.
- Accept kids for who they are and what they prefer. It may not matter if fabric softener was (or wasn’t) used on your pajamas, but for kids who are extra sensitive to texture or scent, that daily quality of life issue means a lot.
- Coach kids in problem-solving, especially if they are prone to tantrums. When a child butts heads over a toy, teach trading, negotiating, or taking turns.
- Prepare kids for new experiences. *Slow-to-warm-up* or *difficult* children will need more time to process information, adjust, and adapt. The bigger the change, the more questions a child will have. Spend more time preparing or even rehearsing for change.
- Prepare kids for predictable sensitivities. If the shrill tornado drill makes your child cry every Tuesday, give a warning that the loud sound is coming.
- Ignore what you can. If a child whines and complains that the beans “feel scratchy,” resist reacting negatively or sarcastically. Simply say, “I’m glad you tasted them.”
- Teach coping skills. An easily distracted child can sit closer to the teacher. During study or meal times, keep radio, television, and the telephone off so kids can focus.
- Pick your battles wisely. When living with difficult, spirited children, prioritize expectations. Focus on safety first, perhaps neatness later.
- Model calm expression of feelings, especially when you are mad, frustrated, or tired.
- Avoid name-calling. It infers children can’t change their behavior. It’s not true.

- Use positive discipline. Set age-appropriate expectations, comment on success, appreciate cooperation and, when necessary, follow-through with respectful, reasonable consequences.

## Parenting Books

- *Understanding Temperament: Strategies for Creating Family Harmony* by Lyndall Shick. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press, Inc. 1998.
- *Temperament Tools: Working with Your Child's Inborn Traits* by Helen Neville and Diane Clark Johnson. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press Inc., 1997.
- *Learning & Growing Together: Understanding and Supporting Your Child's Development* by Claire Lerner and Amy Laura Dombro. Washington, DC: Zero to Three, 2000.

## Web Sites on Temperament

- Temperament Learning Center: [www.kidtemp.com](http://www.kidtemp.com)
- Preventive Ounce: [www.preventiveoz.org](http://www.preventiveoz.org)

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.