



Temperament Differences in Infants and Children

Does your child giggle or cry when you tickle her? Does he cry or cling when you take him to a new place for the first time?

These differences in behavior have to do with something called “temperament”—how an individual responds to situations and to other people. For example, easygoing people tend to react calmly to stress. Others are more on edge and react more intensely. Temperament helps explain why two children with the same parents can be very different.

You see a range of temperaments in children from the moment they’re born. For example, some babies:

- are adaptable, positive, and moderate (40 percent)
- have a variety of temperament traits (35 percent)
- adapt slowly at first, but warm up over time (15 percent)
- react very negatively to new situations and people (10 percent)

As a parent, it’s important to understand your child’s individual temperament. One parenting style may work better than another. How well your child’s temperament fits in with yours plays a big part in your child’s self-esteem. If the fit isn’t good, your child could develop behavioral problems. If it is a good fit, children are more likely to feel good about themselves.

Some temperament traits are easier to live with than others, but each has its advantages and disadvantages. For example, children who adapt more slowly to change are often strong-willed and more self-aware. Children who adapt more quickly are often more likely to be swayed by peer pressure. Once you understand your child’s temperament, you are less likely to blame your child or yourself for behavior that is completely normal for your child.

If you’re curious about your child’s unique behavioral style or are having trouble dealing with it, ask your doctor or health care professional about local resources, such as classes or counseling. You may be asked to complete a Temperament Questionnaire.

One of the ways to evaluate temperament starts with a questionnaire that asks about:

1. your child’s energy level
2. the intensity of your child’s reactions to events
3. how quickly your child accepts changes
4. your child’s first reaction to new situations
5. the regularity of your child’s daily patterns
6. how sensitive your child is to his or her environment
7. how your child handles frustration
8. how easily your child is distracted
9. your child’s general mood

When the results of the questionnaire are analyzed, you may be able to meet with a health care professional to talk about your child's patterns. This should help you understand what is normal for your child, given his or her temperament. Enrolling in a temperament-based parenting class (taught at several Kaiser Permanente locations), will teach you even more about finding the best parenting style for you and your child. Call the Health Education Department at your facility or look online, at kp.org, to find out more information about classes in your area.

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Other resources

- Visit The Preventive Ounce: preventiveoz.org.
- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- Read *Is This a Phase? Child Development and Parent Strategies: Birth to 6 Years*, Helen Neville; and *Temperament Tools: Working with Your Child's Inborn Traits*, Helen Neville.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.