

FOCUS

On
Early
Childhood



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Flexible, Fearful or Feisty: Temperamental Differences

More than 30 years ago, two pediatricians named Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess identified three types of temperaments (personalities) in young children: easy, slow-to-warm-up and difficult (or "flexible, fearful or feisty"). Most parents who have more than one child, as well as those who care for young children, know that even in the same family children often have distinctly different ways of responding to their environments. Unfortunately, however, many parents and caregivers don't always use this knowledge to respect their children's distinct personalities but expect every child to behave the same.

Temperament expresses itself in at least five different ways: emotional intensity, activity level, tolerance for frustration, reaction to new people and reaction to change. The easy/flexible child can adapt to change easily, for example, while the difficult/feisty child will resist it, sometimes strenuously. The slow-to-warm-up or fearful child may seem very shy and clingy while the easy child jumps right into new social situations.

Temperament just is: "Temperament is not something your child chooses, nor is it something that you created....The goal isn't to change your child's temperament, but to help him or her make the most of her unique temperament—both its strengths and the areas where she may need more support" (Zero to Three). Caregivers often blame parents, and parents often blame themselves for not being good parents or blame the child for not behaving according to their expectations when in fact the child is simply expressing his or her own unique temperament.

Tips for working with different temperaments:

- Understand your own temperament.
- Pay attention to the unique characteristics of each child's temperament and accept the child for who he or she is.
- Acknowledge that the child's temperament might be part of the reason for a particular behavior.
- Adapt routines or change the physical environment at home or in child care to avoid situations that cause "meltdowns."
- Recognize that each temperament has its strengths and your job as a parent or caregiver is to help the child learn how to function effectively.

Resources:

- *Raising Resilient Children*, by Robert Brooks and Samuel Goldstein (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001), chapter 6.
- "Tips on Temperament," from Zero to Three; www.zerotothree.org (search for Temperament)
- "Temperamental Differences," by David Elkind, Ph.D.; <http://www.justaskbaby.com/blogs/professor-elkind/temperamental-differences>
- "Temperament," Wikipedia; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temperament>