

Temperament: What Makes Your Child Tick?

Temperament is the collection of characteristics that makes each person unique and that shapes the way they experience the world and interact with others. Temperament is a key factor in children's development, as it influences how children experience the world and provides important insight into the meaning of their behavior. Temperament is biologically based—the result of each person's unique wiring in the brain and nervous system. So your child did not choose his temperament, and it's not the result of something you did or didn't do.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- **Be a careful observer and tune in to your child's temperament.** Think about where your child falls on the following continuums:
 - ▶ **Emotional intensity:** Is he a big reactor, who may squeal with delight and run around excitedly when happy, but then have a knock-down-drag-out tantrum in reaction to a seemingly small problem? Or is he a more easygoing, go-with-the-flow kind of guy?
 - ▶ **Sensory reactivity:** Does she love and seek out lots of action and activity like at the mall or playground? Or are those kinds of highly stimulating experiences overwhelming to her?
 - ▶ **Activity level:** Does your child want to always be moving and on the go, or does he prefer quiet, less active play?
 - ▶ **Adaptability:** Does she adapt easily to new experiences, whether it's new friends, new foods, or new babysitters? Or is she slower-to-warm-up, needing time and support to feel comfortable with new people and places, and even new routines?
 - ▶ **Persistence:** Does your child show patience to work through a challenging task, like rebuilding the block tower when it falls? Or is he more likely to get frustrated and give up easily?
- **Respect your child's temperament.** For a cautious, slow-to-warm-up child, this might mean visiting a new child care center in advance and meeting the teachers so she feels safer and more comfortable starting in this new setting. A child who gets overwhelmed easily by lots of sensory stimulation may need to be held in a baby carrier on your chest to feel safe in the mall or grocery store.
- **Look for patterns.** Recognizing patterns in your child's behavior that are influenced by temperament can help you anticipate your child's responses to certain situations. If you know that your child has a hard time making transitions, you can guess that pick-up time at child care might be challenging. You could share this observation with your child's teacher and talk about how you can work together to make the end of the day easier. For example, the teacher can give your child a reminder that it will soon be time to go home. You might also choose to spend a few minutes helping your child finish what she is doing, rather than leaving the classroom right away.
- **Help your child cope and adapt.** A child's behavior and approach to the world are shaped by his experiences and especially by his interactions with you. For example, children who are temperamentally shy can become more outgoing and comfortable in new situations when their parents help them sensitively and slowly adapt to new experiences. Children who are highly reactive can learn to manage their strong feelings when parents remain calm and help children learn strategies for expressing their emotions in healthy, acceptable ways.