

Handout #4

Nine Temperament Traits of Infant and Toddlers

(from “Temperaments of Infants and Toddlers” by Stella Chess, M.D., in *Infant/Toddler Caregiving: A Guide to Social-Emotional Development*)

Temperamental Traits and Their Handling

In describing the nine different traits, I will emphasize the extremes in each case – for example, high levels of energy or sensitivity versus low levels – because children with these traits are the ones most likely to need special attention or handling. I will give typical examples of how very young children express traits and suggest the best caregiving approaches to take.

The majority of children display temperament at a level somewhere in between the extremes of temperament, and these children will fit into home or child care routines fairly easily. In this sense, temperament is similar to intelligence, that is, children of low average or very high intelligence may require special attention, and those of average or slightly superior intelligence will adapt to the routine school curriculum without great difficulty. We will also look at how these specific traits often combine in a child’s overall makeup to form a certain major type of behavior.

1. **Activity Level:** Amount of movement and bodily activity

High Activity

The child who is highly active prefers games and play with a lot of movement, kicks and splashes in the bath, likes to run around, gets restless and distressed if made to sit quietly in one spot for long periods. Give a child with this level of activity opportunities for active play. If the group is engaged in some quiet activity, let this type of child move around from time to time.

Low Activity

This child with low activity prefers quiet games and can sit calmly looking at picture books or coloring for long periods of time. Because this child moves slowly, she or he is sometimes teased as a slowpoke. You should expect that it will take a child with this level of activity extra time to get things done, such as dressing or moving from one place to another.

Handout #4 (cont.'d)

- 2. *Biological Rhythms:*** Regularity or irregularity of such functions as sleep-wake cycle, hunger, and bowel elimination

Regularity

The regular child sleeps through the night, takes a regular nap, eats about the same amount from day to day, and has a bowel movement about the same time each day. This child presents no problem with feeding or sleeping schedules and is usually toilet trained.

Irregularity

In contrast to the regular child, this one varies in sleep habits and hunger patterns, and she or he may wake several times a night. The irregular child's big meal may be lunch one day and dinner the next, and her or his bowel movements are unpredictable. You should accept this child's irregular nap and feeding schedules. The child can be trained to sleep through the night if not picked up every time she or he cries. Toilet training will usually take longer and may not succeed until the child learns to be consciously aware of the internal sensation that signals a bowel movement.

- 3. *Approach/Withdrawal:*** How the child responds to a new situation or other stimulus

Approach

The approacher responds positively to a new food by swallowing it, reaches for a new toy, smiles at strangers and when first joining a play group, plunges right in. Such a child presents few problems to the caregiver, except when this responsiveness is combined with a high level of activity. Then the approacher may run impulsively to climb a new high rock or jungle gym that she or he cannot really manage or try to explore a potentially dangerous object.

Withdraw

Typically cautious about exploring new objects, the withdrawer is likely to push away a new toy or to spit out new food the first few times. Around strangers or when first taken to a new place, this child may fuss or cry or to strain away. You should be patient with these initial negative reactions. Pressuring the child to make an immediate positive adjustment only increases her or his discomfort and makes it harder for the child to accept new people and things. Instead, small repeated exposures to the unfamiliar let the child gradually overcome her or his early reflection.

Handout #4 (cont.'d)

4. ***Adaptability:*** How quickly or slowly the child adapts to a change in routine or overcomes an initial negative response.

High Adaptability

The quickly adaptive child adjusts easily to the family's move to a new home or a visit to a strange place. This child accepts new food that was first rejected after only a few trials, and this child is agreeable to changes in mealtimes and sleeping schedules. Such a child does not usually present problems to a caregiver. Occasionally, the youngster may give in too early to unreasonable requests for change, such as a playmate changing the rules in the middle of a game. The quickly adaptive child may benefit by encouragement to "stick to your guns."

Low Adaptability

By contrast, the slowly adaptive child takes long long time to adapt to change or to accept something new she or he originally rejected. Such child is sometimes misjudged as stubborn or willfully uncooperative. A more accurate term would be cautious. Your approach should be the same as for a withdrawing child – being patient, giving the child a number of exposures to the change, and encouraging the child when she or he begins to show signs of adjusting. Pressure to make a child adapt very quickly will only boomerang and have the opposite effect.

5. ***Quality of Mood:*** The amount of pleasant, cheerful, and openly friendly behavior (positive mood) as contrasted with fussing, crying, and openly showing unfriendliness (negative mood)

Positive mood

Smiling and laughing often, the child whose mood is positive is easily pleased and shows it openly. Fussing and crying are infrequent. This positive mood usually causes positive responses in adults, who find it easy to care for such children.

Negative mood

The child whose mood is negative tends to fuss or complain a lot, even at trivial discomforts, and cry before going to sleep. The child may show little or no open expression of pleasure, even at games or other events that please, but rather will have a deadpan expression. You should be sure to sop such a child. While not ignoring the child's fussing or complaining, responds cheerfully to her or him. You may find to your surprise that, although the child gives no outward evidence of pleasure at some special events, such as an expedition to the zoo, the child later reports it to her or his parents or friends as an exciting, happy event.

Handout #4 (cont.'d)

6. ***Intensity of Reactions:*** The energy level of mood expression, whether it is positive or negative

Low Intensity

The low-intensity child expresses both pleasure and discomfort in a low-key way. If happy, this child may smile or say quietly that she or he is pleased; if upset, the child may whine a little or fuss but not loudly. It is easy to misjudge and miss what is going on inside the child if you take the mild reactions as evidence that she or he is not really displeased or upset. Remember that mild expressions may mask strong emotions. Pay careful attention to such expressions, and take seriously the feelings behind them.

High Intensity

By contrast, the high-intensity child expresses her or his feelings with great intensity. When happy, this child bubbles and laughs; when upset, she or he cries loudly and may even have a tantrum. In this case, you have an opposite task: evaluate objectively whether the issue is important or trivial and not be guided only by the intense relations of the child.

7. ***Sensitivity Threshold:*** How sensitive the child is to potentially irritating stimuli

Low Threshold

The child with a low threshold may be easily upset by loud noises, bright lights, a wet or soiled diaper, or sudden changes in temperature. This child may not be able to tolerate tight socks or clothing with rough texture. You should be aware of and attend to those reactions but try not to change them.

High Threshold

The child with a high threshold is not bothered by the same kind of stimuli as the child with low threshold. You should check regularly to see if the infant has a wet or soiled diaper to avoid diaper rash. Otherwise, this child may be content to suffer the diaper irritation because the child's high threshold keeps her or him from feeling irritated and uncomfortable.

Handout #4 (cont.'d)

8. ***Distractibility:*** How easily the child can be distracted from an activity like feeding or playing by some unexpected stimulus – the ringing of a telephone or someone entering the room

High Distractibility

The highly distractible child may start and look up at the sound of a door closing softly. As one parent put it, half the solid food feeding went into the child's ear because she constantly turned her head at small noises or glimpses of movement. In the early childhood period, the tendency can be an asset to the caregiver. The child who is fussing at being dressed or is poking at an electric outlet can be easily distracted by showing her or him a toy or other attractive object. In older childhood, however, when persistent concentration on a task like homework is welcomed, high distractibility may not be such a desirable trait.

Low Distractibility

The child who is not easily distracted tends to stick to an activity despite other noises, conversations, and people around her or him. This is desirable at certain times, such as feeding or dressing, when the child's full attention makes her or him cooperative. But low distractibility creates a problem if the child is intent on trying to reach a hot stove and will not easily be diverted: the child may have to be removed from the situation.

9. ***Persistence/Attention Span:*** Two closely related traits, with persistence referring to how long a child will stay with a difficult activity without giving up, and attention span referring to how long the child will concentrate before her or his interest shifts

High Persistence

The highly persistent child with a long attention span will continue to be absorbed in what she or he is doing for long periods of time. In the early childhood years, the highly persistent child is often easy to manage because once absorbed in an activity, the child does not demand your attention. However, the child may get upset and even have a tantrum if she or he is forced to quit in the middle of an activity, for example, at bedtime, mealtime, or departure time at a child care center. In such cases, you should warn the child in advance if time is limited, or you may decide to prevent the child from starting an activity that will have to be ended abruptly. The highly persistent child may also keep badgering to get something she or he wants, even after a firm refusal.

Handout #4 (cont.'d)

Low Persistence

The child with low persistence and short attention span will not stick with a task that is difficult or require a long period of concentration. If the bead does not go on to the string right away, or if the peg does not slip into the hole after a few pokes, the child will give up and move on to something else. This child presents few caregiving problems in the early stages of childhood. Later, however, a short attention span and lack of persistence make learning at school and home difficult.