

FROM TIMID TO TENACIOUS:

Working with Difficult Temperament Traits to Help All Children Succeed!

Child care providers observe, parents know, even strangers pick up clues... each child's temperament is different from the start. When upset, some babies barely whimper while others scream for dear life; some giggle and coo and others maintain a more contemplative gaze. Some infants cuddle quietly for long periods while another endlessly squirm. Awareness of a child's distinctive temperament can help adults understand a child's unique needs and develop strategies that work for each child. The reality is, the fit you provide each child will make all the difference!



WHAT IS TEMPERAMENT?

Temperament is simply our natural instinctive response to our environment. Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess, the original temperament researchers, were able to identify and measure nine temperament traits that illustrated babies' different responses to the same situation. Numerous studies have confirmed these traits and found them to be consistent over time and that they continue into adulthood.

Think of a child in your life who seems to challenge you in a unique way. Fill out the temperament chart on page two and take note, which traits seem easier and more difficult for you?

SOME TEMPERAMENT TRAITS ARE VERY CHALLENGING, ESPECIALLY IN COMBINATION WITH EACH OTHER.

Imagine a toddler who is highly persistent, emotionally intense, and not very distractible. This is going to be extra challenging for sure! But, the reality, adults will not be able to change this child's temperament so it will be important to work with all children to find the strategies that help the child succeed no matter what their unique temperament makeup. **Thankfully, adults do have the unique ability to influence the expression of a child's temperament over time!**



NO TEMPERAMENT TRAIT IS INHERENTLY GOOD OR BAD.

Each trait has a positive side and can have desirable results depending on the age of the child and that child's interaction with their environment. A persistent one-year-old who makes the hundredth straight attempt to get on the counter will definitely increase frustration for caregivers. However, it is outstanding when that same child, at nine-years-old, remains determined to complete even the most difficult assignment. Adults can get very frustrated when a three-year-old with a negative first reaction rejects new places, people, and things. However, this "no" impulse will be a great attribute if, as a teenager, this child is pressured to partake in illegal substances! Whether or not a child's specific temperament has a positive or negative outcome will be determined by the way the adult, child, and environment interact over time.

ADULTS CAN WORK WITH A CHILD'S TEMPERAMENT TO ENSURE EACH AND EVERY CHILD HAS A CHANCE TO LEARN THE SKILLS NEEDED TO SUCCEED IN SCHOOL AND LIFE!

Provide a "good fit":

The #1 way to ensure a positive outcome for all children is to provide a good fit between the child's temperament, your expectations, and the child's environment. For example, in order to listen and behave well, a child with a high activity level needs ample space and time to move. Help the child thrive by providing movement during learning activities, a chance to get their wiggles out before expected to sit.

Avoid common triggers:

Children who are easily distracted have trouble if they have a lack of routines or are given too many directions at once. A persistent child will have problems if abruptly interrupted, not given choices, or if there are unclear or changing limits. A child that is slow to adapt will be triggered by too many changes, being rushed, and surprises. It is much easier to work with a child when there are limited triggers in a day.

Build the positive side:

For best results, put your energy into building the positive side of a trait rather than trying to change the child's natural reaction to the world. A child with a first reaction of "no" to a fun play-group or greeting a new relative will challenge adults. But, pushing a child when he/she is uncomfortable will not make this child "quick to warm up". Adults can help by acknowledging the positive, "Wow, you really watch before joining in. You like to make sure things are safe before doing them. I bet you will join when you are ready". Providing encouragement and insight (not pressure) will help him understand his reaction and over time adjust as needed (most older children do join play rather quickly).

Avoid negative labels:

A child's traits can be enhanced or diminished over time. Imagine a highly intense child hearing continual messages like, "This child is a monster." "This child is our challenging one." "Watch out for this one!" With this reinforcement of the negative side of this trait, the child's intensity will likely increase over time. Remember, you can be a child's best advocate. People will end up viewing and treating a child similar to those adults who are close to that child.

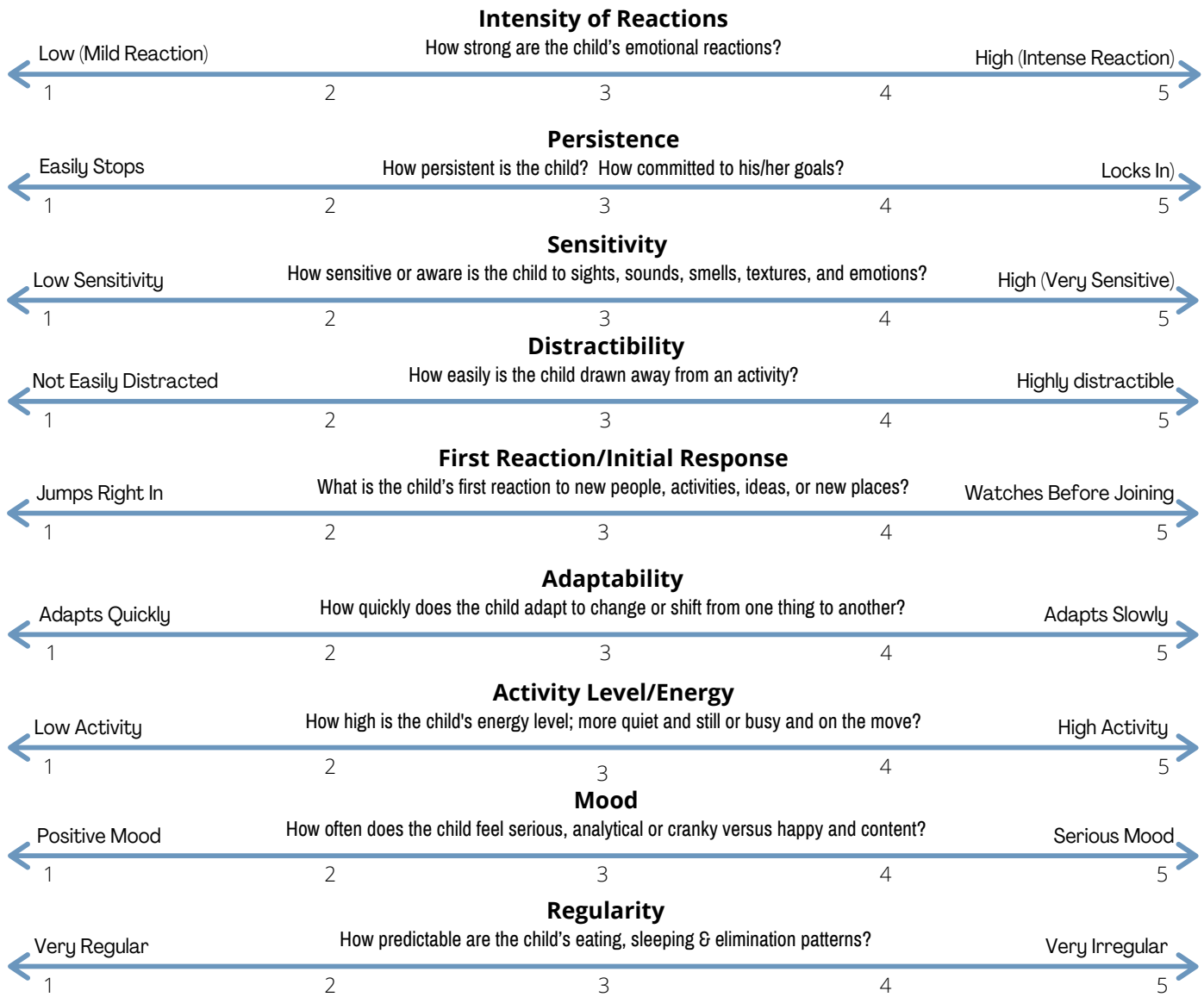
Keep limits and boundaries:

Do not let temperament be an excuse for unacceptable behaviors. Just because a child experiences big emotions, does not mean it is okay to lash out physically at others when upset. This child will need to learn techniques to soothe and calm those emotions. Start out with lower expectations but then work on building the needed skills. For example, help a child who hits others when angry learn to hit a pillow instead, then only clench and shake hands to release tension, later encourage expression through words, say, "I'm mad!".

Promote self-awareness:

Help a child understand themselves. "Sometimes rough clothes bother you. Let's pick out something soft today." "Your body sure needs to move, we have been sitting awhile, let's groove!" The child's increased understanding will help the child adapt as to their environment over time.

Temperament Chart



Learn more:

There are so many ways to work with different temperamental traits to avoid power struggles and build a positive connection with children.

Remember, you have a temperament too! The way an adult and child meld is a result of the interaction of both temperaments. Begin building on your positive relationship by recognizing and valuing each of your unique qualities. The children you care for will gain the skills needed for the future while building a rewarding relationship with a caring and compassionate adult today: YOU!



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