

Temperament

What is Temperament?

Mellow, fussy, happy – these are but a few of the words you might use to describe the behavior of your baby as you’re getting to know her. These observations are often the first steps in recognizing your baby’s temperament, a biologically-based “way of being” that shapes a child’s experiences even as the child is being shaped by her surroundings.

Clues to a baby’s temperament come in everyday moments – such as baby’s mood and attention span, and even her motor skills and sleep habits. Getting to know your baby is really about understanding her temperament.

Why Temperament Matters

Your child’s temperament may affect the way you feel about yourself as a parent, but it is not a reflection of the quality of parenting.

- ★ Parents with happy, agreeable babies often feel more confident and competent as parents, while irritable, difficult-to-console babies can make parents feel like they aren’t a good parent, which can lead to lower self-esteem and decreased parental and relationship satisfaction.



What Parents Can Do

General strategies:

- ★ **CONSIDER** your own temperament. You and your child may have very different temperaments, but you will need to find ways to work together.
- ★ **UNDERSTAND** and accept your child's temperament. This can be difficult, but doing so is one of the most effective ways to aid development and to gently influence how your child's temperament is expressed.
- ★ **RECOGNIZE** that inborn differences in behavioral style are real.
- ★ **REMEMBER** that your child's temperament, and your reaction to it, affects all the relationships in your home.

Specific tips:

- ★ **MAKE TIME** to nurture and develop all the relationships within your home, because any temperament – even a very difficult one – is easier to manage in a positive, well-functioning household.
- ★ **RECOGNIZE** your own temperament style as well as your child's.
- ★ **TELL YOUR CHILD** what to expect in new situations, which can make transitions easier.
- ★ **ROLE PLAY** new or difficult experiences, like what it might be like to have a new babysitter or go to a friend's birthday party.

Your baby's behavior reveals her temperament

You can learn a lot about your baby's temperament by thinking about her behavior and responses in terms of intensity, from low to high: There are a number of "dimensions" scientists use to measure and understand temperament. This chart, which is not intended as a scorecard or questionnaire, can help you think about your baby's temperament in several ways:

LOW	ACTIVITY LEVEL – How busy is your baby?		HIGH
	Able to sit still, doesn't seek out physical activities	Always wants to move, difficulty sitting still	
	SCHEDULE-ABILITY – How predictable is your baby?		
	Natural tendency to accept a schedule for eating & sleeping	Unpredictable eating & sleeping patterns	
	SOCIABILITY – How "open" is your baby?		
	Easily "dives in" to new situations	Is cautious or shy in new situations	
	ADAPTABILITY – How flexible is your baby?		
	Adjusts easily to changes and transitions	Needs to be prepared ahead of time for changes and transitions	
	SENSITIVITY – How easily upset is your baby?		
	Not bothered by loud, busy environments, feelings not easily hurt	Very sensitive to loud noises, certain odors, textures, and tastes; feelings can be easily hurt	
INTENSITY – How does your baby express emotions?			
Fairly low-key, subtle signals, even when emotional	Long, loud crying, excitable when happy, may become overstimulated		
OUTLOOK – What is your baby's mood?			
Tendency towards positive mood	Easily becomes sad, angry, or frustrated		
DISTRACTIBILITY – How focused is your baby?			
Can focus on a task, tunes out distractions but can be difficult to calm when upset	Easily sidetracked from an activity, struggles to concentrate but is easy to redirect		

Chart adapted from Jan Kristal's book *The Temperament Perspective: Working with Children's Behavioral Styles*, 2005.