



Planning for Individual Infants and Toddlers in Group Care

Understanding and Adapting to Individual Temperaments

Temperament is a person's basic nature or natural way of being. Learning about temperament can help you understand and explain a child's behavior, which in turn can lead to more responsive, individualized care for infants and toddlers. It takes time to learn about an individual's temperament. Observing during daily care routines and play, and communicating with families, can help teachers learn about each child's unique temperament and find ways to support the child.

Each person is born with a certain temperament that is expressed through the way he or she feels about, approaches, and reacts to interactions and experiences in the world (Thomas & Chess, 1977). In their landmark study, through extensive interviews with parents about their infant's behavior, researchers Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess defined nine traits of human temperament. Here is a list of the nine traits as found in Figure 6.1 of D. S. Wittmer and S. H. Petersen's book, *Infant and Toddler Development and Responsive Program Planning: A Relationship-Based Approach* (2017, p. 122):

1. Activity level: Amount of physical movement
2. Biological rhythms: Regularity of eating, sleeping, elimination
3. Approach/withdrawal: Comfort in new situations
4. Mood: Amount of time in pleasant, cheerful mood as opposed to fussing, crying, or resisting others
5. Intensity of reaction: Energy level of emotional expressions
6. Sensitivity: Response to sensory information, including light, sounds, textures, smells, tastes
7. Adaptability: Ability to manage changes in routine or recover from being upset
8. Distractibility: How easily the child's attention is distracted
9. Persistence: How long a child will stay with a difficult activity before giving up (Thomas, Chess, Birch, Hertig, Korm, 1963)

In general, a child will show certain behaviors for each trait. For example, one infant may be extremely active and have an intense need to continually move, while another infant may be happy to move slowly around the environment watching things. One toddler may keep trying something over and over, showing high persistence, until she experiences success, while another may try something one time and, if it does not work, give up trying. One infant may react with high intensity to changes in temperature, such as a cold, wet diaper wipe, and scream loudly. Another infant might have the same physical feeling about changes in temperature but his intensity of reaction is mild; he may make a face, or turn away. This does not mean he feels it less than the screaming infant, and that is an important point for teachers to be aware of with children in their care. The child with the biggest voice may not be the child with the biggest need at the moment.

These nine temperamental traits often appear in groupings referred to as temperament types or styles. The three types are as follows:



- ◆ **Easy or flexible:** Children with this temperament tend to be easy-going, happy, calm, and adaptable, and have regular sleeping and eating habits.
- ◆ **Active or feisty:** Children with this temperament may be very active, fussy, and have intense positive or negative reactions to a variety of situations. They may also have irregular sleeping and eating habits.
- ◆ **Slow to warm or cautious:** Children with this temperament may be hesitant or fearful in unfamiliar situations, move slowly, and prefer to watch a situation for a while before joining in. They may have a difficult time with changes, such as having a new caregiver or a shift in the daily schedule.

Although it may be easy to imagine that all children fit neatly into one of the three styles of temperament, some children have characteristics of more than one of these temperamental types. Therefore, understanding how an individual child expresses or experiences the nine temperament traits will give you a deeper understanding of his or her unique needs and behavior than a specific style might.

Talking with parents and family members will help you further understand the individual temperament of a child. Families often tell us about their children's behavior at home, what they like or dislike, and how they may be with strangers or extended family members. Share stories of what you observe and how you adapt your care and interactions to best support their child's unique needs, interests, and abilities, and ask parents what they experience at home. You may also ask families to partner with you in completing a developmental assessment for their child. This information will add details that help you understand the individual needs of their child. You may also wish to share information or resources with parents such as this [video on temperament](#) from Zero To Three.

To help you understand the individual temperament traits, the Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation has provided the [Infant Toddler Temperament Tool \(IT³\)](#), developed by Georgetown University's Center for Child and Human Development. This interactive site introduces you to the nine temperament traits and has an online survey you can take to assess temperament traits in adults and children. The IT³ tool is also available in [Spanish](#).

Ensuring Goodness of Fit

In a relationship between an adult and an infant or toddler, it is the adult's responsibility to adjust to the temperament needs of each child. The ways you change your own behavior and expectations based on your understanding of another person is the basis of "goodness of fit." In essence, you are fitting yourself to the child. Goodness of fit happens when an adult changes expectations and practices to support the unique temperament and abilities of a specific child (Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, n.d.). Over time, and with the support of caring adults, each child can learn to manage his or her own temperament and adjust to the demands of daily life.

Here is an example of how an adult might adapt to a child to create an environment where he or she can thrive, experience success, and develop to his or her potential: The adult recognizes that a young toddler needs to observe the other children in the sandbox before entering, and provides support by being nearby, commenting on what the other children are doing, and gently inviting the child to come play when he is ready.

Reflection Questions

- ◆ How do your interactions with each infant and toddler in your care differ from one another?
- ◆ How do you support an infant who cries desperately when her father leaves in the morning?
- ◆ How do you respond when a toddler races into the play yard and hardly takes a moment to tell his grandmother goodbye at drop-off?



- ◆ Do you enjoy busy play times or do you prefer the quietness of the afternoon when some children may be napping and you have time to snuggle and play with one or two infants? What is it that you like about the time you prefer? What does this tell you about yourself and your own temperament?

Your feelings and responses to these kinds of daily experiences are signs of your temperament. At the same time, as a care teacher, you are also adapting to the individual temperaments of the children in your care.

- ◆ How do you change how you speak, move, or interact with a child based on what you know about him or her?
- ◆ Does one toddler enjoy a squeeze and a tickle, while another may prefer a gentle touch on the hand?
- ◆ Have you ever cared for children who do not really enjoy being snuggled, even though you really like to hold them close?
- ◆ In reflecting on these questions, do certain children and adults in your life come to mind?

Sometimes people think that if the temperaments of the adult and child are similar, it may be easier to establish a fit. This may be true in some cases, such as if the adult and child both prefer quiet, predictable surroundings. But often, people benefit from being with others whose temperaments are quite different from their own. Can you think of a person in your life who may be more outgoing than you are, who draws you into experiences you might otherwise miss? Or do you have a person in your life who holds back a bit and maybe keeps you from jumping into things too quickly? We do not have to be like another person to get along with each other.

Reflect on temperament traits you observe with children and ask families to share what they see. Is a child's temperament like that of a family member? Often siblings express very different temperaments from each other and this can be a big adjustment for growing families. Regular, two-way conversations with families can help you to understand each child in your care.

The benefits of establishing goodness of fit as you adapt to the individual needs of the infants and toddlers in your group care setting include the following:

- ◆ Respectful and responsive relationships with each child and his or her family;
- ◆ An environment where each person is accepted as an individual;
- ◆ Anticipation of how children might behave or react before a problem arises;
- ◆ Observing and sharing observations of a child's development with the child's family; and
- ◆ Children's development of a healthy sense of self.

The following are key considerations as you create goodness of fit to support the temperament styles of the infants and toddlers in your care.

- ◆ Engage with families by asking questions about their infant or toddler, such as the following:
 - How does your child respond to new experiences, such as unfamiliar house guests or going somewhere for the first time?
 - Are your child's sleeping, eating, and elimination routines predictable or do they vary from day to day?
 - How does your child explore? Does he or she tend to get right in the middle of the action or prefer to watch from a distance for a while?
- ◆ How does the child care environment support different children's temperaments?



- Do children have free access to places where they can be active and busy, and separate spaces to be quiet and still?
- How might noise levels, bright lights, and room temperature affect each child?
- How do the spaces for routine care, such as meals and diapering, allow for choices? For example, can a toddler safely climb onto the changing table by herself?
- Can an infant be held on a lap for a meal or sit in a small chair at a table?



- ◆ How might the daily schedule support different children's temperaments?
 - Is there plenty of free time for exploration and play, allowing children to follow their interests at their own pace?
 - Do you build in one-on-one time with each infant or toddler to reconnect and be together in a way that works best for each child?
 - Can each child eat when she is hungry and sleep when she is tired? Are you paying attention to how these needs change as children develop?
 - Are transitions—such as from meals to resting, or from outside to inside—predictable and planned in a way that allows each child to adjust to the upcoming change?
 - Is there a balance of indoor and outdoor time in the daily schedule, or free access between indoors and outdoors when weather allows?
- ◆ How might your temperament, expectations, speech, and actions affect each child and the group as a whole?
 - Do you speak loudly or quietly?
 - Do you prefer to be active or quiet?
 - Are you comfortable with predictable routines or do you prefer changing things to make the day more fun?
 - Which children do you find easier to care for and how might that be related to the natural fit of your temperaments?
 - Are there infants and toddlers in your care who need you to adjust your own style? For example, if you tend to be active, is there a child who responds better when you slow down, get quiet, and wait?
 - Do you find ways for an active child to move freely, even if you would rather have her sit near you and read a book?

Working to provide a goodness of fit for each child will benefit the entire group of infants and toddlers and will show families that you care, have respect, and are committed to supporting every child. Your knowledge and awareness of adapting to a child's temperament can help you feel connected and make your daily life with infants and toddlers even more enjoyable.

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