

Easy children are regular and predictable in routines such as eating, sleeping, toileting, alertness, and cuddling times. Easy kids are flexible, adaptable, and generally accommodating. They have a chipper disposition. They are friendly and slow to rile or to become pessimistic. Their enthusiastic, outgoing attitude can lead them to leap too quickly into new experiences.

Slow-to-warm-up children are distinguished by their cautious nature and *wait and see* attitude. Given time to *warm-up* at their own pace, they gradually adjust to new circumstances. Unfortunately, these children are often labeled as “shy.” In truth, they are usually only “shy at first.” Once they get to know people and trust in a situation’s safety, they can be as outgoing and friendly as the next child.

“Difficult” or **“spirited”** children are irregular in routines related to sleep, eating, and alertness. They are often fussy and picky. As infants, it’s hard to predict what type of cuddling and eye contact they will enjoy, much less when and for how long. They can be extremely sensitive to one or more senses — touch, taste, scent, sound, or light. When encountering new experiences they can be negative, preferring to withdraw rather than to interact or cooperate. Unexpected changes — even small ones — can throw them off kilter for a whole day. Such children intensely express their feelings — especially when resisting someone else’s ideas. They easily lose control of their behavior.

Responding to Your Child’s Temperament

I bet you’ve spied your child in that list. As you respond to your child’s temperament, work *with the grain* of their innate make up, rather than against it. You’ll become a more nurturing, compassionate parent who builds children’s self esteem. There’s a bonus for parents, too. Kids who feel accepted and supported are more respectful and cooperative. That makes family life easier for everyone! Here are some tips:

- Focus on the positive side of temperament. While difficult, intense persistence is maddening in the candy aisle, it can be a wonderful trait in an environmental activist or defense lawyer when a child grows up. And a slow-to-warm-up child may be the good listening therapist or concert pianist the next decade needs.
- Coach an easy child to look carefully before becoming an over-eager, unquestioning joiner. (This is especially important when kids face peer pressure.)
- Avoid unflattering comparisons. “Why can’t you be more like your brother/sister?” erodes confidence. Honor everyone’s uniqueness.
- Cue into activity level. High energy kids need regular boisterous play time. Low energy kids need quiet times for reflection and refilling emotional reserves.
- Cue into child’s *alert* times. Plan energy-demanding activities during your child’s up times.
- Pace daily errands according to your child’s rhythms. Be prepared with juice and crackers for kids unable to predict hunger. Know where bathrooms are.
- Accept kids for who they are and what they prefer. It may not matter if fabric softener was (or wasn’t) used on your pajamas, but for kids who are extra sensitive to texture or scent, that daily quality of life issue means a lot.
- Coach kids in problem-solving, especially if they are prone to tantrums. When a child butts heads over a toy, teach trading, negotiating, or taking turns.
- Prepare kids for new experiences. *Slow-to-warm-up* or *difficult* children will need more time to process information, adjust, and adapt. The bigger the change, the more questions a child will have. Spend more time preparing or even rehearsing for change.
- Prepare kids for predictable sensitivities. If the shrill tornado drill makes your child cry every Tuesday, give a warning that the loud sound is coming.
- Ignore what you can. If a child whines and complains that the beans “feel scratchy,” resist reacting negatively or sarcastically. Simply say, “I’m glad you tasted them.”
- Teach coping skills. An easily distracted child can sit closer to the teacher. During study or meal times, keep radio, television, and the telephone off so kids can focus.
- Pick your battles wisely. When living with difficult, spirited children, prioritize expectations. Focus on safety first, perhaps neatness later.
- Model calm expression of feelings, especially when you are mad, frustrated, or tired.
- Avoid name-calling. It infers children can’t change their behavior. It’s not true.

- Use positive discipline. Set age-appropriate expectations, comment on success, appreciate cooperation and, when necessary, follow-through with respectful, reasonable consequences.

Parenting Books

- *Understanding Temperament: Strategies for Creating Family Harmony* by Lyndall Shick. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press, Inc. 1998.
- *Temperament Tools: Working with Your Child's Inborn Traits* by Helen Neville and Diane Clark Johnson. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press Inc., 1997.
- *Learning & Growing Together: Understanding and Supporting Your Child's Development* by Claire Lerner and Amy Laura Dombro. Washington, DC: Zero to Three, 2000.

Web Sites on Temperament

- Temperament Learning Center: www.kidtemp.com
- Preventive Ounce: www.preventiveoz.org

For More Information...

about creative parenting ideas, check out the Parenting Exchange Library at www.ChildCareExchange.com.

■ **Self Esteem Category** • *Road to Good Self Esteem Begins in Childhood*

- *Encouraging Words Build Children's Confidence*
- *Careful Choice of Words Protects Self Esteem*

■ **Friendship Skills** • *Social Skills Kids Need to Make and Keep Friends*

■ **Positive Discipline Category** • *The Fundamentals: 7 Steps to Well Behaved Kids*

■ **Power Struggles** • *Coping with Power Struggles Requires Patience and Resolve*

■ **Brain Development** • *Intelligence, IQ is Just One Measure of Smarts*

— Additional resources available in Article Archives at www.ChildCareExchange —

■ **Temperament: Who We Are** by Roslyn Duffy

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