

Handout

THREE TEMPERAMENT TYPES

The Easy or Flexible Child (about 40% of most groups of children)

Typically, the easy child is regular in biological rhythms, optimistically approaches most new situations, adapts quickly, and has a predominantly positive mood of low or medium intensity. Such a child is indeed easy for the caregiver. She or he is easily toilet trained, learns to sleep through the night, has regular feeding and nap routines, takes to most new situations and people pleasantly, usually adapts to change quickly, is generally cheerful, and expresses her or his distress or frustration mildly. In fact, children with easy temperaments may show very deep feelings with only a single tear rolling down a cheek.

The Difficult or Feisty Child (about 10% of children)

The difficult child is the opposite of the easy child. The child may be hard to get to sleep through the night, her or his feeding and nap schedules may change from day to day, and the child may be difficult to toilet train because of irregular bowel movements. The difficult child typically fusses or even cries loudly at anything new and usually adapts slowly. All too often this type of child expresses an unpleasant or disagreeable mood and, if frustrated, may even have a temper tantrum. In contrast to the “easy” child’s reaction, an intense, noisy reaction by the difficult child may not signify a depth of feeling. Often the best way to handle such outbursts is just to wait them out.

Caregivers who do not understand this type of temperament as normal sometimes feel resentment at the child for being so difficult to manage. They may scold, pressure, or appease the child, which only reinforces her or his difficult temperament and is likely to result in a true behavior problem. Understanding, patience, and consistency, on the other hand, will lead to a “goodness of fit,” with a final positive adjustment to life’s demands.

The Slow-to-Warm-Up or Fearful Child (about 15% of children)

There is a group of children who are often called shy. The child in this group also has discomfort with the new and adapts slowly; but, unlike the difficult child, this child’s negative mood is often expressed slowly, and the child may or may not be irregular in sleep, feeding, and bowel elimination. This is the child who typically stands at the edge of the group and clings quietly to her or his mother when taken to a store, a birthday party, or a child-care program for the first time. If the child is pressured or pushed to joining the group, the child’s shyness immediately becomes worse; but if allowed to become accustomed to the new surroundings at her or his own pace, this child can gradually become an active, happy member of the group.

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