

~ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS ~

An e-newsletter supporting effective adult learning practices

June 2012

MONTANA EARLY CHILDHOOD PROJECT

Issue #35

TEMPERAMENT AND TRAINING

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tem·per·a·ment - noun \ 'tem-p(ə-)rə-mənt, -pər-mənt \: characteristic or habitual inclination or mode of emotional response <a sweet temperament> ~ Merriam-Webster

INTRODUCTION

Temperament can be simply defined as the way an individual responds to the environment and thus, the characteristics of temperament are observable in a teaching situation. Understanding the influence of temperament on behavior can make a difference in the adult-child relationship, for better or worse. Acceptance of children's differing temperaments is an essential part of successfully nurturing and educating young children.

For the most part, teachers feel most comfortable with children who have temperaments similar to their own. This makes it imperative that teachers understand children's differing temperaments and be aware of their impact on children's behavior and on interpersonal relationships.

WHAT IS TEMPERAMENT?

The Ohio State University Extension Service answers the question of "what is temperament" with the following explanation (Oliver 2002).

"Children are born with their natural style of interacting with or reacting to people, places, and things—their temperament. In the late 1950s, temperament research began with the work of Alexander Thomas, Stella Chess, and associates. The New York Longitudinal Study (1999) identified nine temperament characteristics or traits. The researchers found that these nine traits were pre-

sent at birth and continued to influence development in important ways throughout life. By observing a child's responses to everyday situations, the researchers could assess these temperaments. Temperament is stable and differs from personality, which is a combination of temperament and life experiences, although the two terms are often used interchangeably."

Since the 1950s, many scientific studies of temperament have continued to show that children's health and development are influenced by temperament. We all know children who are much more challenging to deal with than other children, starting at birth. The realization that many behavioral tendencies are inborn—and not the result of bad parenting—is perhaps one of the most important insights parents gain from learning more about temperament."

TEMPERAMENT AND ADULTS

Temperament is not only an element of childhood; it is an integral part of who a person is throughout his or her life. Understanding the characteristics of differing temperaments is the foundation for building productive relationships with adults in training events and other learning situations.

Becoming aware of your own personal temperament is the critical first step. As it is with teachers and children, you are likely to feel most comfortable with

people with similar temperaments. Because the opposite is also true—you are most likely to feel *uncomfortable* with individuals whose temperaments are *unlike yours*—conflicting temperaments can lead to misunderstanding or frequent irritation.

Anything that interferes with the formation of positive relationships may make it difficult for you to engage another person in the teaching/learning process. Interestingly, when this happens, neither party seems to know why! By understanding temperament, you can work with the individual rather than trying to change his or her inborn traits.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TEMPERAMENT

The nine temperament traits or characteristics identified in the New York Longitudinal Study can be identified by observing the way an infant, child, or adult *initially* reacts to a situation *most of the time*. These observations can then be rated on a continuum to give them more precision and make comparisons.

It is important to note that the continuum for each trait falls between two extremes. However, ratings anywhere on the continuum are considered within the range of “normal” behavior—including the two extremes!

The following descriptions further explain the nine traits (adapted from Wikipedia.org).

1. ACTIVITY

Activity refers to the person's physical energy. Is the person constantly moving, or does the person have a relaxed approach? A high-energy person may have difficulty sitting still in class, whereas a person with low energy can tolerate a very structured environment. The former may use gross motor skills like running and jumping more frequently. Conversely, a person with a lower activity level may rely more on fine motor skills, such as taking notes and fingering table toys. This trait can also refer to mental activity, such as deep thinking or reading—activities which become more significant as the person matures.

Activity Level	
active quiet	
Comfortable when active.	Comfortable when inactive, may need encouragement to act or move.

2. REGULARITY

Regularity, also known as Rhythmicity, refers to the level of predictability in a person's biological functions, such as waking, becoming tired, hunger, and bathroom habits. Does the person have a routine in eating and sleeping habits, or are these events more random? For example, a person with a high regularity rating may eat lunch at a certain time (and place) every day; people further to the right of the continuum may happily eat sporadically throughout the day.

Regularity Level	
regular irregular	
Predictable patterns for eating, sleep, elimination, etc.	Less predictable from day to day.

3. INITIAL REACTION

Initial reaction is also known as “Approach or Withdrawal.” This refers to how the person responds (whether positively or negatively) to new people or environments. Does he or she approach people or things in the environment without hesitation, or stand and watch or shy away? A bold person tends to approach things quickly, as if without thinking, whereas a cautious person typically prefers to watch for a while before engaging in a new experience.

Initial Reaction Level	
bold cautious	
“Goes for it”—eager to reach for or interact with something new.	Backs away or appears fearful of something new at first.

4. ADAPTABILITY

Adaptability refers to how long it takes the person to adjust to change over time (as opposed to an initial reaction). Does the person adjust to the changes in the environment easily, or is he or she resistant? A

person who adjusts easily may be quick to settle into a new routine, whereas a resistant person may take a long time to adjust to the new situation.

Adaptability Level	
adapts quickly adapts slowly	
Readily accepts changes in routine, new foods, places, people, etc.	Takes time and needs support to accept change or new experiences.

5. INTENSITY

Intensity refers to the energy level of a positive or negative response. It is important to remember that the loudness or quietness of a reaction does not tell us the strength or importance of the person's *feelings*. Does the person react intensely to a situation, or does the person respond in a calm and quiet manner? A more intense person may jump up and down screaming with excitement, whereas a mild-mannered person may smile or show little or no emotion.

Intensity Level	
high intensity low intensity	
Reacts loudly—loud laughter, loud cries, and loud voice.	Reacts quietly.

6. MOOD

Mood refers to the person's general tendency towards a happy or unhappy demeanor. Everyone has a variety of emotions and reactions, such as cheerful and stormy, happy and unhappy. Yet each person biologically tends to have a generally positive or negative outlook on the world. A person who frequently smiles and expresses willingness to participate could be considered a cheerful person, whereas a person who frequently frowns and is initially reluctant to participate might be considered a stormy or cranky person.

Mood Level	
positive negative	
Initial response is favorable to most situations.	Expresses discontent as the initial reaction to many situations.

7. DISTRACTIBILITY

Distractibility refers to the person's tendency to be sidetracked by other things going on around them. Does the person get easily distracted by what is happening in the environment, or can he or she concentrate despite interruptions? An easily distracted person is diverted by external events and has difficulty returning to the task at hand, whereas a rarely distracted person stays focused in spite of distractions and completes the task at hand.

Distractibility Level	
easily distracted not distractible	
Easily diverted from current interests or challenges.	Difficult to change focus to anything but the immediate interest or issue.

8. PERSISTENCE (ATTENTION SPAN)

Persistence (attention span) refers to a) the length of time a person stays on task and b) the ability to stay with the task through frustrations. Persistence denotes whether the person stays with an activity for a long period of time or loses interest quickly.

Persistence Level	
long attention span short attention span	
Sustains and continues effort in times of difficulty or conflict.	Tends to give up quickly in times of difficulty or conflict.

9. SENSITIVITY

Sensitivity refers to how easily a person is disturbed by sensory stimulation in the environment. Is the person bothered by external stimuli like noises, textures, or lights, or does the person seem to ignore them? A sensitive person may lose focus when a door slams, whereas a person less sensitive to external noises will be able to maintain focus.

Sensitivity Level	
not sensitive very sensitive	
Only high levels of stimulus cause a reaction	Bothered by many sensations including minor pain,

(extremely loud noises or major cuts/scrapes).	noise, tastes, temperature, or feel of clothing.
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TEMPERAMENT SELF-ASSESSMENT

Rate yourself on the continuum for each of the nine temperament characteristics above. Focus on the way you respond in training events and consultation activities (as opposed to how you might respond at home or other environments).

TEMPERAMENT OBSERVATION

Using a colored pen, rate a training participant, coaching partner, co-worker, or other individual whom you find puzzling or challenging. Use examples of actual behaviors to provide evidence for your decision as to where the person best fits on each continuum.

REFLECTION

After you complete the self-assessment and the observation, ask yourself the following questions:

- ~ What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about the other person?
- ~ How are your temperaments alike? How are they different?
- ~ Are there differences in how you value each indicator depending on whether it applies to yourself or to someone else? (For example, persistence. . . .)

How might this information about temperament influence your work with this person? With other adults? With children?

CONCLUSION

Temperament is innate and thus continues from childhood through adulthood. Later studies by Chess and Thomas show that these characteristics influence behavior and adjustment throughout the lifespan. Un-

derstanding a person's temperament can help you re-frame how you interpret his or her behavior and the underlying reasons for the behavior. Using this knowledge, you can engage the person in ways that respect individual differences. Understanding others' temperaments—as well as your own—helps you work with them rather than try to change them. Recognizing these individualities provides an opportunity to anticipate and more fully accept and appreciate the other person's reaction.

Temperament does not excuse unacceptable behavior; it offers direction as to how to respond to it. Making small and reasonable accommodations to routines and activities can reduce tension and still meet expectations. For example, a person with a short attention span may need extra time to complete an activity or implement a new practice.

Knowing who or what may affect a person's behavior can help to alleviate potential problems. Although temperament behaviors are inborn, you can guide learners in continued growth and development by taking time to identify—and more importantly react positively to—differing temperaments.

Recognizing the role of temperament and understanding how it impacts a person's life is important. It is just as important for you to recognize your own temperament. Recognizing each individual's temperament helps to prevent and manage problems that may arise from the inherent differences that naturally exist. ~

***RESOURCES**

*Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas, 1996. *Temperament*, Routledge.

*Kathy K. Oliver, M.S., 2002, Family and Consumer Sciences Agent, Hardin County, Ohio State University Extension, *Understanding Your Child's Temperament*, The Ohio State University.

<http://ohioline.osu.edu/flm02/FS05.html>

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS was established by the Early Childhood Project at Montana State University in 2004 with monies from the federal Child Care and Development Fund administered through the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services Early Childhood Services Bureau (ECSB). It is designed to support positive and effective training strategies for use in early childhood professional development.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS is published four times a year. Individuals who have applied and been approved on the Montana Professional Development Specialist (PDS)/Trainer Directory receive the e-newsletter as a benefit. If you are not currently on the PDS Directory, please go to www.mtecp.org and click on Trainer Directory for more information.

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