

Frequently Asked Questions about Temperamental Characteristics

1. What is temperament? Where do the characteristics come from?

Temperament is behavioral style: the how of behavior rather than the what or why. Temperamental differences are present at birth; they influence how children behave toward individuals and objects in their environments and how they are affected by the environment. Temperament characteristics explain in part how individuals with many stresses may do well while some with little or no stress have difficulty.

2. How do temperament characteristics affect parenting?

While some infants are mild and joyful others are irritable and cry persistently. Easy babies are so pleasant to care for they may receive (and give back) loads of affection and attention. The fussy, spirited child may scream and kick when given attention. As development unfolds, the fussy child may feel aversive to the caregiver and receive less nurturance and affection.

This is a striking reality for some parents who have an easy baby followed by a feisty one (or vice-versa). Many parents feel guilty and wonder if they have harmed their child because the spirited ones are so much more difficult to raise. Actually about one child in 6 is temperamentally "spirited" through no fault of the parent.

3. Are spirited infants and children more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems?

Temperament may make certain children in certain environments more likely to have these problems. These 'risk factors' occur when there is a mismatch between the child's temperament and some demand in the environment—a poor fit between the child's temperament and the expectations for behavior in the situation. 'Easy' babies and children may have 'protective' factors where mismatches are rare and the rate of conflict is low.

4. How can professionals help parents deal with infants and children who have difficult temperament characteristics?

There are four basic ways to use temperament information to help children and their caregivers:

- a) Education about the existence of temperament differences;
- b) Individual behavioral assessment of a particular child, using a standardized questionnaire;
- c) Environmental intervention; systematically changing the environment to accommodate temperamental characteristics;
- d) Support groups to discuss parenting techniques and strategies for coping with a spirited youngster.

5. Why should a standardized questionnaire be used to determine temperament?

The primary caregiver nearly always has the most experience with the infant or child and is the expert on their behavior. However, the primary caregiver is rarely aware of the major categories of temperament and the boundaries between some of the overlapping dimensions. Ratings using an age specific questionnaire can focus the caregiver's experience and give a temperament profile that is likely to be more valid than general impressions.

6. What is the relationship between temperament and ADHD?

Certain normal temperament characteristics are similar to those regarded as symptoms of ADHD. Activity level, distractibility and persistence are normal personality characteristics but hyperactivity, impulsivity and inattention are facets of ADHD. It is very likely that many children are being diagnosed with ADHD when in fact they do not have a neurobehavioral disability.

Be especially cautious of an ADHD diagnosis when the youngster has recently had a major life change (new school or teacher, neighborhood, babysitter), and was previously well adjusted. Many spirited children need time to adjust to changes in rules, routines and expectations before they will be comfortable and settle in. The slow adaptation is not ADHD; it is temperament. The ADHD diagnosis require six months or more of inappropriate behavior influencing the child in two or more major areas of their lives.

7. Can temperament affect my child even though I know my child has ADHD?

All children have temperaments. Even children who have been diagnosed with ADHD may have temperamental characteristics that create "poorness of fit" issues. Assessment and environmental changes to address temperament issues can still be very helpful in many cases.

8. What if my helping professional doesn't know about temperament?

Although most licensed and certified professionals know about the existence of temperament research, many do not know about the information and resources available for use in practice today. Providing a copy of this faq or suggesting a visit to the professional version of this web site at <http://www.b-di.com> would give them access to the tools available for using temperament information in their practices.

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