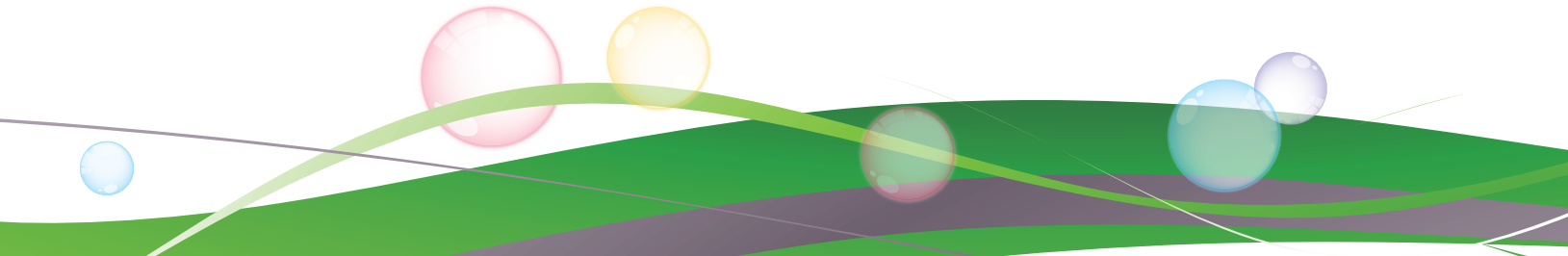
The Temperament Project

Avera

United Way
Sioux Empire United Way



Dear Parent,

Temperament is the way a person deals with the world, day in and day out. Temperament is part of our genetics; it can't be changed, but it can be managed.

There are nine different temperament traits: activity, regularity, approach/withdrawal, adaptability, intensity, mood, persistence, distractibility and sensitivity. These traits are displayed in our behavior. Learning about your child's temperament can help you learn parenting approaches that will work best in directing your child's behavior.

To help you understand your child's unique temperament profile, we created this booklet to explain the temperament traits and help you better understand how they may affect your child's behavior.

Family Life Educators are available to discuss your parenting concerns. To arrange for a visit in person or by phone, call 605-322-3660 or email temperament@avera.org. There is no charge for this service thanks to a grant from the Sioux Empire United Way.

Sometimes there are no difficult behaviors to deal with at the time the profile is done. But as your child grows and develops, behaviors may become more challenging. Call or email any time with questions.

Being a parent is not an easy job. That's why we are here to help.

Activity Level

Refers to how active a child is or how much physical energy is used.

Highly Active Characteristics

- Is often vigorous and energetic.
  Tip: Build in extra time for activity breaks during prolonged car trips or other low movement activities. (Note: Be sure the car is stopped before the child is allowed out of safety restraints.)

  Tip: Avoid unnecessary restrictions of activity, such as sitting through a movie.

- Large muscle developmental milestones such as crawling, standing or walking may be achieved earlier than less active age-mates.

- Increased mobility can increase the chance of accidents.
  Tip: "Baby-proof" your child's environment as he becomes more mobile. Be extra cautious in situations where your child might roam or wander into danger. He or she has little or no ability to judge these situations.

Moderately Active Characteristics

- Child rarely has difficulty adjusting to overly active or inactive situations.

- May enjoy some active pastimes.

- May sit quietly at times.
  Tip: Follow your child's cues as to his or her need for activity.

Less Active Characteristics

- Needs encouragement to incorporate physical activities into a healthy lifestyle.

- May leave some tasks undone or need extra time to do them.
  Tip: Set realistic time limits. Looking at the steps the child has completed rather than at the whole process can help us encourage the child toward completion.

Rhythmicity

Refers to the predictability of a child's sleep-wake cycle, hunger and eating and toileting from day to day.

Highly Irregular Characteristics

- Lack of predictability may cause difficulty in toilet teaching.
  Tip: Waiting until your child is developmentally prepared to manage toileting needs will increase success for the irregular child.

- May be hungry between meals or refuse to eat at mealtime.
  Tip: Bring along healthy snacks, just in case.

- Bedtime struggles may occur due to irregularity in sleep patterns.
  Tip: Even though your child might respond unpredictably, regular mealtimes and bedtimes should be established and the child encouraged to follow them. This doesn't mean punishing your child for failure to comply, but rather being firm and consistent in maintaining routines.

Moderately Regular Characteristics

- Sometimes consistent, other times not.
- Has little difficulty staying on schedule.

Highly Regular Characteristics

- Usually maintains a consistent routine and may become upset when routine is disrupted.
  Tip: Warn child of impending disruptions to schedule. Recognize child's need to be regular.

- Predictability may increase the chance of earlier success in toilet learning.

First Response

APPROACHING OR WITHDRAWING

Refers to a child's very first response to a new food, person, toy or place.

Highly Approaching Characteristics

- Quickly adjusts in new situations.
- Usually has no difficulty separating from parents.
  Tip: May get lost in crowds or stores. Parents need to keep a very watchful eye.
- May be impulsive.
  Tip: Lacks fear in potentially dangerous situations. Parents need to watch very carefully to protect child from harm.
- The approaching child may approach strangers easily.
  Tip: This child should have frequent reinforcement of the rule not to approach anyone he or she doesn't know unless Mom or Dad is with him or her.

Moderately Approaching Characteristics

- May approach quickly in some situations and slowly in others.
  Tip: In less comfortable situations, respect child's need for some time to just "watch."

Withdrawing or Less Approaching Characteristics

- Needs time to warm up to a new experience.
- May have difficulty separating from parents.
  Tip: Prepare child ahead of time.
- May want to eat only certain foods or play with certain toys.
  Tip: Continue to offer new foods or new situations without pressure to participate. Over time these new things may become more familiar and therefore more acceptable.

Adaptability

Refers to how much time a child takes to adjust to changes including intrusions, restrictions, expectations, transitions or abrupt shifts in plans.

Highly Adaptable Characteristics

- Usually compliant with changes.
  Tip: May be readily led by others to unacceptable behavior; may need help learning or practicing assertiveness.

Moderately Adaptable Characteristics

- Adjusts to changes fairly easily in most situations.
- There may be specific situations in which the child has a more difficult time adapting. For those situations, follow the "less adapting" techniques below.

Less Adapting Characteristics

- May have difficulty adjusting to changes of any kind.
  Tip: Provide advance warning and gradual introduction of new activities. A "sink or swim" approach may lead to future difficulty for this child. Gradual introductions to new things are necessary.
- Behaviors may be interpreted as being stubborn.
  Tip: This negative interpretation can be unnecessarily judgmental of your child. If you realize your child's need to think things through before acting, your approach will be more positive and helpful.
- Less likely to be led by others into negative behaviors.

Intensity of Expression

Refers to the energy level of a child's response.

Highly Intense Characteristics

- Puts a lot of energy into emotional expression.
  Tip: Encourage child to speak calmly in order to be understood.
- May scream very loudly for wants and needs.
  Tip: Avoid responding with the same intensity as the child. Try to read the child's real need and respond calmly.
- May mislead caregivers as to the importance of the issue.
  Tip: Avoid giving in just so the child will be quiet.

Moderately Intense Characteristics

- Typically, the amount of emotion expressed compares to the child's true feelings.
- The volume of their emotional expression is consistent with their degree of concern.

Less Intense Characteristics

- May be hard to read. Even though your child experiences emotional needs, it is usually difficult for those around to notice.
  Tip: Be alert to the possibility that your child's strong emotions may be expressed mildly.
- May be mistakenly viewed as uninterested.

Predominant Mood

Refers to the child's tendency to be either smiling and cheerful or unsmiling and thoughtful.

Positive Mood Characteristics

- Generally is happy and content.
- May be described as "happy-go-lucky."
- This characteristic encourages positive and friendly responses from those around the child.

Moderate Mood Characteristics

- Generally has a balance of both positive and negative moods.
- May be generally positive but still have cranky periods. These are usually related to the situation itself rather than temperament.

Less Positive Mood Characteristics

- May have more negative reactions such as distress, discomfort, anger or disappointment.
  Tip: Avoid responding to child's negativity with misplaced guilt. Fix the things you can fix and understand that the child's response is part of his or her temperament.
- May be more serious or somber.
  Tip: Remember, this is your child's nature. He or she may be taking some time to think through the issue and it doesn't necessarily mean he or she is unhappy about it. Children with a more somber mood frequently have difficulty getting a positive response from the people around them. Make sure that you smile and offer encouragement.

Persistence Level

Refers to a child's tendency to continue an activity until it is finished.

Highly Persistent Characteristics

- Rarely gives up on difficult tasks.
  Tip: Give advanced warning when a task needs to be interrupted.
- May take on challenges beyond her skill level.
  Tip: Help child to break task into smaller steps she or he can handle.
- May do things the hard way because he or she doesn't like to ask for help.
  Tip: You may be able to offer ideas from the "sidelines" on how to do something or ask the child to think of ways to do something that might be easier.

  Tip: Redirecting a very persistent child who has chosen an unacceptable activity isn't easy but can be accomplished with firm consistency.

Moderately Persistent Characteristics

- May choose to complete some activities while other activities may be left incomplete.
- Usually focuses on tasks for only a brief time but also is capable of periods of sustained interest.

Less Persistent Characteristics

- May become easily frustrated and give up on simple tasks.
  Tip: Directions need to be clear and specific, like: "Put this book on the bottom book shelf, please."

- May be easily drawn away from unsafe or unsuitable activities.

- Has a tendency to stick with things he or she naturally does well.
  Tip: Encourage activities that promote self-confidence and positive self-esteem. When the child is able to do something well, provide opportunities to do it often.

- May struggle with or resist learning self-care skills such as potty training, dressing, and tying shoes.
  Tip: Organize activities into shorter segments. For example, you might start the zipper and then let the child finish zipping it. Positively reinforce every successfully completed step.

Distraction Level

Refers to how easily a child is drawn away from an activity she is involved in and how easy it is to soothe the child when upset.

Highly Distractible Characteristics

- Notices things easily and can be diverted from tasks.
  Tip: Redirect the child's wandering attention positively and without criticism.
- Easy to soothe as an infant.
- May change activities often, leaving toys scattered.
  Tip: May need to pick up toys after each activity period so task doesn't become too daunting.
- Tends to be forgetful.
  Tip: Gently redirect child to task at hand and encourage child to be responsible for remembering. May need prompting to remember – a sticker chart might help.

Moderately Distractible Characteristics

- Likely to show a mixture of responding to and ignoring distractions that could interrupt ongoing activities.
- Probably not seen as having difficulty staying on task, nor is the child likely to change activities frequently in response to distractions.

Less Distractible Characteristics

- Tends to stay with tasks until complete.
- Able to complete chosen activities in a noisy place.
- May tune out background noises, including parent directions, when focusing on activity.
- Less likely to forget something he wants and may challenge parents until they are tempted to give in.
- May become caught up in his or her own world and not notice things around him or her.
  Tip: Recognize the positive things the child does rather than focusing on behavior that may be less desirable.

Sensory Threshold

Refers to how much stimulation is needed to evoke a child's response.

Highly Sensitive Characteristics

- Keen senses may cause sensitivity to the flavors, texture and temperature of foods.

- May be picky, finicky or particular about touch, noises and lighting.
  Tip: Avoid exciting activities just prior to bedtime. Provide child with comfortable, well-fitting clothes. Visits to grocery stores and malls will need to be modified to accommodate the child's increased sensitivity to all the different sensory stimulation at these places.

- May be very sensitive to how others treat him and may get his or her feelings hurt easily.
  Tip: Support and encourage the child. Talk with your child about different ways of thinking about the situation.

- Tend to be "people pleasers" and fear making mistakes.
  Tip: Look for valid opportunities to support the child's self-esteem. Be sure to point out those occasions when he or she is right. Acknowledge when you make a mistake, letting the child know that everyone makes mistakes and that is how we learn to do things better.

  Tip: Allow opportunities for sensory play like using play dough, splashing in water or finger painting. Often just drawing offers the sensitive child an outlet or the tensions that accompany increased sensitivity.

Sensory Threshold continued...

Moderately Sensitive Characteristics

- Usually has a balanced reaction to light, touch, taste, sound and temperature.

- There may be specific situations where reactions are unusually strong, as well as situations where the child doesn't notice minor changes.

Less Sensitive Characteristics

- Relatively unaffected by sensory stimuli, such as bright lights, strong tastes or different textures.

- May not always display how she or he feels emotionally.

- May not complain of pain or anxieties.
  Tip: Parents need to be careful with children who are low in sensitivity as it may be easy to miss cues or implied messages about situations over which the child may be distressed.

- Tends not to worry about what others think of him or her.
  Tip: While this is generally a positive thing, we also need to help the child to develop an awareness of others' feelings. This can be done through conversations in situations where the child would be receptive to this information. For example:

"Look at Suzie's face. She is crying. I think she feels very sad. Remember when you felt sad about dropping your ice cream cone? I wonder what made Suzie feel so sad today? Shall we go and give her a gentle hug? Let's tell her we hope she feels better soon."

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