



# **Why Temperament Matters**

**Guidance Strategies for  
Young Children**

**Cindy Croft**

## Why Temperament Matters

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# **Why Temperament Matters**

Guidance Strategies for Young Children

Cindy Croft

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# Introduction

Children come to us with a natural wiring that comes partly from genetics and partly from the environment around them. We can't fundamentally change the disposition of a child, nor would we want to. Every child is unique, and it is in this uniqueness that we find so much to celebrate. Honoring every child is the work of early childhood. We want all children with their diverse dispositions to know that belonging is not just about attending our programs but about expressing vital and necessary parts of themselves. Everyone matters and everyone has a unique and equally important role to play in our child care communities.

In my years of work in early childhood, I have seen children who struggled to belong and providers who, in turn, struggled to include all children. Children keep the stamps we put on them in these early years. If they are repeatedly moved from program to program, they can begin to believe they are a bit less worthy than their peers. They can accept external statements that they are too busy or not a good fit and internalize those judgments. Providers, too, can feel a sense of failure because they couldn't meet a child's needs. Often what becomes identified as challenging behavior is the nature of the child, waiting to be nurtured and guided. My hope is that this book will give providers the tools to better support who children naturally are.

## Strategies and Temperament Traits

Chapters 3 through 11 are laid out exactly the same, each one highlighting a specific temperament trait. There is a definition of the trait as well as short vignettes throughout each chapter highlighting a child with that specific temperament trait. Each chapter examines a trait through the lens of its impact on a child's behavior, from high to low. For instance, low activity in energy would mean a child engages with less enthusiasm, whereas a child on the high activity end of the energy range would exhibit more zeal in actions and reactions. These chapters also look at positive and challenging behaviors related to each trait. Each chapter examines how a temperament trait influences relationships with adults and peers as well as how it affects play and other development. Each chapter contains strategies for individualizing programming as well as guidance strategies for a child demonstrating dominance in one of the temperament traits. Strategies will vary depending on the common challenges associated with a particular temperament trait. There are also some temperament traits that are not typically associated with

challenging behaviors, and strategies for those include more positive approaches. Each chapter about a temperament trait ends with a story of success based on a child who has been positively included in child care.

## Usage of Terms

I use the terms *early childhood educator*, *child care provider*, *caregiver*, and *teacher* interchangeably to refer to the same professional in the early childhood field. *Child care program*, *classroom*, *early education program*, *early childhood setting*, and *family child care* are also used interchangeably to refer to the setting where children are cared for and educated from birth through preschool age outside of the family home.

All children's names are fictitious and represent a composite of children I have known over the years. All child care programs are also fictitious and also represent aspects of programs I have seen or heard about through the Center for Inclusive Child Care, an inclusion coaching program in St. Paul, Minnesota. The pronouns *he* and *she* are used interchangeably throughout this book and do not indicate that certain temperament traits are more prevalent by gender.

## Why Temperament Matters!

Every child care program has a unique blend of children, from the extroverted daredevil to the quiet teacher pleaser. Our classrooms reflect the world around us. The diversity of personalities is what makes early education challenging and fun at the same time, while teachers say this is the job they love!

What makes every child so unique? No matter the size of a child care program, there will be children who want to be the center of attention and those who prefer to quietly play in the reading nook. Children come into this world with their own wiring that is influenced partly by genetics and partly by the environment around them. We refer to all the characteristics that make up a child's personality as her temperament. Temperament is the predisposition we are all born with, and it colors the way we react to the world around us. My definition is "the characteristic way that the individual experiences and responds to the internal and external environment" (Croft 2007, 43). Temperament is innate and part of who we are from birth.

Because temperament is present at birth, an infant will show personality characteristics that become recognizable as part of her overall nature as she grows. For example, an infant might be resistant to a sleeping schedule in her early weeks. A few years later, that same preschooler may have difficulty in child care when snacktime comes and she isn't hungry for another half hour. The infant's emerging personality can be seen as a small seed, and nurturing and support from her primary caregiver helps the child grow successfully into the unique person she was born to be.

Why does temperament matter to you as an early educator? For one thing, everyone has temperament traits. Every child you care for comes to you with different combinations of nine temperament traits. The temperament traits a child has influence every part of her child care day, from when she arrives, to lunch, to when she goes home at the end of the day. For instance, if a child is hungry before everyone else in the class, hunger may make her irritable and unwilling to share with a friend. Or if she has difficulty persisting in a table activity, she may become disruptive in order to make a change.

While everyone else is napping or lying quietly on their mats, Lionel can't stop fidgeting and moving his feet around. He just has to touch the friend lying next to him. His little body doesn't slow down the way others' bodies do at quiet time.

As educators and providers, the more you know about an individual child's temperament traits, the better equipped you are to adapt the environment to accommodate her physical, behavioral, and learning needs. The purpose of this book is to explain how each of the nine temperament traits can affect a child's behavior in child care and offer strategies for building success for both children and providers. Building a sense of mastery for everyone in the classroom promotes a positive environment!

## Understanding Temperament Traits

Broadly speaking, the components that make up the personality and disposition of children and adults is known as temperament. For instance, a child's personality might be energetic and outgoing, with temperament traits like high activity level and high approach. The individual nine temperaments go together to give each person their unique personality. We will talk in more depth about temperament traits in the next section. It is sometimes thought that temperament is changeable over time, but in fact it is fairly stable from infancy into adulthood. A child with high intensity will not become a child who shows little or no reaction to his world, but that child can learn skills in early childhood to help regulate some of his reactions. Temperament is influenced by environment, which is why the early education setting plays an important role in how temperament manifests in child care. One example of this is a child care setting that uses muted colors, dims the lights at times, and puts quiet centers next to other quiet centers. These calming influences help a child who can be overstimulated by a noisy or active environment, allowing her to stay on a more even keel.

There are other influences on temperament as well, such as stressors in a child's life that cause anxiousness in a child who might otherwise be adaptable.

Our culture tends to view boys as more active and girls as more social, but these traits in individual children have more to do with genetics than culture or gender. Social relationships will have some influence on behaviors, but they will not fundamentally alter a temperament type. For instance, two friends who are working on a project together will work longer if one of them has higher persistence. It doesn't mean the other child will stay until the end, but she may remain longer than if she had been at the task alone.

Temperament is made up of nine specific traits first categorized in the 1970s by Stella Chess and her husband, Alexander Thomas, psychiatrists who studied child development over a period of several years, particularly temperament and environment. In their research, they measured each trait as high, low, or somewhere in the middle on a continuum on a temperament sorter. Sorters are a way to sequence the traits in an order. An example of a temperament sorter is found later in this chapter. Using a sorter helps you determine where you think a particular child's temperament traits tend to land on the continuum.

## The Nine Temperament Traits

When you examine all the temperament traits together, you see that they form a unique picture of each child with his own way of interacting with his environment. These are the nine traits:

1. **Activity level** is the overall physical energy a child uses in daily activities. How active is the child from an early age? Does he tend to be very busy most of the time or tend toward quiet activities? Was he a wiggly baby or one that nestled in and liked to be swaddled?
2. **Distractibility** refers to how difficult or easy it is for a child to concentrate without being sidetracked. How well does he pay attention if he's not particularly interested? Can his attention be diverted easily, or does he stay concentrated on a task? Does he want you to read every page of the book and notice if you skip any parts of it?
3. **Persistence** describes a child's ability to stick with a task in the face of distractions, interruptions, or frustration. Does the child stay with something he doesn't really like to do? If it becomes difficult, does he stay with it or move to the next game? Will he work on a challenging puzzle until he figures it out?
4. **Adaptability** is about how easily a child adjusts to changes in situations or people. How does the child deal with transitions or changes in routine? Does he roll with it or make a fuss when it is time to move to a new

activity? As an infant, did he go with the flow no matter what was happening? Or did he only sleep in his own bed with his own blankets?

5. **Approach/withdrawal** is about a child's first reaction to new situations or people. What is the child's initial response to newness? What is his reaction to new foods, places, activities, people, and clothes? Does he eagerly approach a new friend or tend toward hesitancy about new people? Does she hold back until she is sure about something?
6. **Intensity** refers to the energy a child uses to respond or react. How loud is the child, whether happy or unhappy? How much energy does he use to express joy, anger, or frustration? As an infant, was he hard to soothe and easily agitated?
7. **Regularity** is about the predictability of the child in his patterns of sleep, appetite, or bodily functions. Does he usually sleep at the same time each day, or is his napping time all over the place and unpredictable?
8. **Sensory threshold** is related to how sensitive a child is to her physical surroundings. How does the child react to sensory stimulation: noise, light, colors, smells, pain, tastes, and textures in clothing and food? Is he overstimulated or bothered by different sensations? Or does he show little reaction to sensory stimulation like a loud noise?
9. **Mood** is a child's general tendency to react positively or negatively to the world around him. What is the child's predominant mood? Is he more generally positive or negative?

## Challenges to Child Care Providers

Child developmentalists know that this natural composition of temperament traits is important because it can influence the trajectory of a child's ongoing positive social-emotional development through her relationship with a primary caregiver. For instance, a child who displays temperament traits that might be perceived as challenging, such as high activity level, could receive fewer positive interactions and more negative reactions from her caregiver. When this happens, the child may feel like there is something wrong with who she is because she senses caregivers' disapproval to her general busyness.

If a child persistently feels like she is being rejected by her provider or by peers, she could begin a downward spiral that continues to lower her sense of worth and sets a pattern for negative behaviors. The challenging behaviors will then continue to negatively impact interactions with her teachers, reinforcing the negative view she has of herself.

Since Albert gets in trouble so much anyway, what is the point of trying to do what the teacher says? He might as well see if he can get sent to the director's office because at least when he is there, she lets him feed the fish.

Conversely, if a child is highly approachable, her caregiver may smile at her frequently and give her positive encouragement for her positive attitude. The child can internalize this as "I must be okay because my teacher really likes me." For this child, the stage is being set for a positive future.

## Temperament Ranges and Clusters

The nine temperament traits above are further classified as having a range and presenting in a cluster of similar traits. Each temperament trait as a stand-alone characteristic has dimensions of impact on a child that we refer to as a "range," or area of variation. While *range* speaks to each individual trait, *clusters* refer to the traits that have characteristics in common or are related in range of high or low impact. In this way, we can better understand the whole nature of a child's personality expressed through their behaviors.

### Temperament Ranges

The impact of a particular temperament trait on a child's behavior can depend on what we refer to as its "range." Temperament range indicates whether the trait is experienced by the child with a high impact or low impact or even somewhere in the middle. For instance, if a child is on the high side of intensity, then we will see behaviors that represent strong self-expression, like loud talking and laughing, or big gestures of unhappiness or joy. He might throw himself on the ground with anger or scream with delight.

Ruby bangs her cup on the table when she puts it down and marches instead of walking. Everything she does, she does BIG. Sometimes her peers aren't sure how to react to her because she can seem scary to them when she shouts or screams. Even when she is happy, she laughs louder than anyone else in the room.

If a child is low in how he expresses intensity, we may see behaviors that are not reactive in the way we would typically expect from a given age range. For instance, a child with low intensity might ignore a friend who hollers at him to hand over the red fire engine. He might react with little energy to a birthday surprise that would make most other children very excited. His emotions are subdued even if he is frustrated or angry.



Gil watches the magician do a magic trick in front of him but doesn't seem surprised when the toy reappears in the box. He turns away and starts to play with a squishy ball in his pocket.

There is no wrong or right, good or bad in temperament or range; it is simply the way a child is naturally wired to react based on that temperament trait. As we will see in chapters 3 through 11, the child's reactions can result in behaviors that are challenging unless there is guidance from adults and an environment that supports positive behaviors.

## Temperament Clusters

Temperament clusters or types are groupings of dominant temperament traits. Dominant traits are the ones that override the other dispositions of a child. Every child has all nine temperament traits, and each one has those traits clustered in some meaningful way. Thomas and Chess were the first to identify these personality types based on infants they were observing in a long-term study (Allen and Cowdery 2012). They noticed through the infant's behaviors a tendency for temperament traits to cluster or group depending on high impact, low impact, or middle-range impact. This is how they determined the three basic temperament types of classifications we still use today:

- Difficult (sometimes described as feisty or active)
- Easy (sometimes described as flexible or easygoing)
- Slow to warm up (sometimes described as fearful)

Chess and Thomas found that flexible or easy babies tended to be active but not to a degree that it was problematic for adults to care for them. They also found that the easy baby had calmer reactions when the unexpected occurred. Infants in this category tended to be "happy and contented" (quoted in Allen and Cowdery 2012, 391). The feisty or difficult category of temperament described an infant who was easily upset and resistant to change. This infant tended to fuss and cry more often than other infants. In addition, his biological regulation for eating, elimination, and sleeping was irregular, making it difficult for him to settle into a routine of care.

Difficult babies are likely to be irritable, easily upset, and vigorously resistant to the unfamiliar. They cry more frequently, and they cry in a way that grates on parents' and caregivers' ears (and nerves). Biological rhythms (eating, sleeping, and elimination patterns) are difficult to regulate. . . .

Slow-to-warm-up infants show few intense reactions, either positive or negative. They seldom are outright resistant to new experiences, but neither are they eager to sample the unknown. For example, instead of fighting off a new food, they may simply not swallow it. . . . Passive resistant is a term used to describe this type of behavior (Allen and Cowdery 2012, 391).

About 40 percent of the sample done by Thomas and Chess categorized children as easy or flexible. From early on, these children tend to be well regulated in sleep and eating patterns and are generally happy and tend to go with the flow. Again according to the sample, 10 percent of children tend toward feisty or active, with higher degrees of irregularity and lower adaptability to change. Fifteen percent are in the category of slow to warm up, with a more negative mood and a harder time adjusting to change. Child developmentalist Laura E. Berk (2013) notes that 35 percent of all children do not fit clearly into one category but instead have temperament traits that are uniquely blended.

## Common Temperament Types

All of us, from infants to adults, have a collection of temperament traits that tend to determine if we are generally a go-with-the-flow, stand-back-and-wait, or hit-life-head-on type of person. Once you understand this, you can see where behaviors related to temperament traits can be challenging at times in different situations. In subsequent chapters, this book will lay out behaviors that might result from each specific temperament trait and will include strategies for making environmental and programmatic changes to modify those behaviors. First we will look at some behaviors specific to the three temperament types: flexible, feisty, and fearful.

### Flexible

The first temperament type is what many early educators might wish they had a classroom full of: flexible, easy temperaments! Children who are easygoing tend to be happy from birth and adjust easily to change. A child who is flexible tends to be a child with temperament traits that are easy to work with. This cluster of traits includes the following:

- A higher level of adaptability, which means the child transitions easily and will make changes without a fuss; a higher level of adaptability means the child probably doesn't demand very much from their caregiver
- A higher approach, which means the child will meet new children quickly and make friends with them; the child will welcome peers right away

- A positive view of what is going on around them

Because children are young and are learning through experiencing the world, there will always be behavior mistakes and mishaps, no matter the ease of the child's personality. Social competence is learned through trial and error in play with peers, but the flexible child will be less likely to exhibit the challenging behaviors that can be so difficult for child care providers, like aggression or overactivity.

Ms. Jennifer pairs Sasha as a lunch buddy with Miko, who has just started this week. She knows that Sasha will help Miko feel like she is a part of things right from the start.

## Feisty

The feisty or active temperament type is the one that can hold many challenges for providers. This cluster of traits includes the following:

- A higher level of activity, which may mean a child moves from center to center without finishing a job
- High distractibility and low persistence, which also points to behaviors that might be frustrating for a teacher if a child doesn't complete tasks or stay in place long enough to learn that activity
- Interference with the play or learning of other children when a child is bored or wants to keep moving
- High intensity, which makes everything the child does louder and bigger

On a positive note, a child who is feisty and active brings a lot of energy and zest to the program, with never a dull moment!

Nicholas comes into the center each morning at full speed ahead, and his teachers don't think he ever slows down! It's hard to get him to stay at a table activity for longer than five minutes, and group time is a constant battle of interruptions. Some of the boys get caught up in his energy at times, but often the children want to avoid him because of the disruption he spreads.

## Fearful

The slow-to-warm-up or fearful temperament type can present some challenging behaviors as well. Temperament traits in this type can include the following:

- High levels of withdrawing behaviors, including not wanting to participate in a new activity, game, or program or with new children or teachers

- Lower levels of adaptability, which can mean a child takes longer to feel comfortable with new people
- Using aggression or similar challenging behaviors when asked by a peer to share a preferred activity instead of moving on to the next activity
- Not wanting to transition to a new activity or go on a field trip since it is not part of the routine or regular schedule
- Refusing to participate and having tantrums to avoid a change

On the positive side, a slow-to-warm child may be more reflective and observant, watching before she acts. She can be a stabilizing force in the program for those children who tend to move before they think.

Ruby loves to be in the reading nook and the art center, but Teacher says she has to go to outside play. Ruby does not like outside play because it is too loud and she doesn't like the way the ground crackles under her feet.

## Understanding Your Own Temperament

It is important for teachers to have an understanding of their own temperament traits and how they perceive their dominant-traits cluster. All of us react to others, including children, with a set of behaviors that have been piloted by our temperaments. For instance, if you tend to be high in adaptability, you will be able to manage your classroom when a coteacher calls in sick. You don't see obstacles as much as you see solutions. However, if you tend to cluster more in the feisty range with a more negative mood and less adaptability, crying that escalates into a tantrum may make you feel like finding a new job! When you know that your temperament can influence how you feel or how you will react, you can take a breath and recoup before you take action.

### Using a Temperament Sorter

A temperament sorter is a way to identify temperament using a scale from high to low. It has been widely used by child developmentalists for many years to determine a child's temperament traits and clusters of traits. It is also helpful for adults to take the sorter to see where they fall in comparison to a child they are rating. Look again at the nine temperament traits and the range from low to high. Consider the following temperament sorter with your own personality instead of a child in mind. Jot down where you think you fall along each of the nine traits.

*Activity Level*

How active is the child from an early age? Does she tend to be very busy most of the time, or does she tend toward quiet activities?

Low Impact				Midrange				High Impact	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

*Distractibility*

How well does she pay attention if not particularly interested? Can her attention be diverted easily, or does she stay concentrated on a task?

Low Impact				Midrange				High Impact	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

*Persistence*

Does the child stay with something she doesn't really like to do? If it becomes difficult, does she stay with it or move to the next game?

Low Impact				Midrange				High Impact	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

*Adaptability*

How does the child deal with transitions or changes in routine? Does she roll with it or make a fuss when it is time to move to a new activity?

Low Impact				Midrange				High Impact	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

*Approach/Withdrawal*

What is the child's initial response to newness? What is her reaction to new foods, places, activities, people, and clothes? Does she eagerly approach a new friend or tend toward hesitancy about new people?

<b>Low Impact</b>				<b>Midrange</b>				<b>High Impact</b>	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

### ***Intensity***

How loud is the child, whether happy or unhappy? How much energy does she use to express joy, anger, and frustration?

<b>Low Impact</b>				<b>Midrange</b>				<b>High Impact</b>	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

### ***Regularity***

How predictable is the child in her patterns of sleep, appetite, or bodily functions? Does she usually sleep at the same time, or is her napping time all over the place and unpredictable?

<b>Low Impact</b>				<b>Midrange</b>				<b>High Impact</b>	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

### ***Sensory Threshold***

How does the child react to sensory stimulation: noise, light, colors, smells, pain, tastes, textures in clothing and food? Is she overstimulated or bothered by different sensations? Or does she show little reaction to sensory stimulation like a loud noise?

<b>Low Impact</b>				<b>Midrange</b>				<b>High Impact</b>	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

### ***Mood***

What is the child's predominant mood? Is she generally more negative or positive?

<b>Low Impact</b>				<b>Midrange</b>				<b>High Impact</b>	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Once you have completed the temperament sorter, look for any pattern that may have emerged. Try to identify your dominant temperament traits. If you marked several traits in the midrange, or with a combination of high adaptability, approach, and positive mood, you are probably flexible in your temperament type. If you see yourself as low on adaptability and persistence, high on activity level and intensity, your temperament type is closer to feisty. If you see yourself as low on approach and adaptability and negative in mood, your temperament type may be fearful.

## Why Your Temperament Matters

Understanding your own temperament traits and style is important for many reasons as you work with young children. For one thing, when you have the same dominant temperament trait as a child in your program, you may find that your similarities can cause clashes between the two of you. You might wonder why you are struggling so much with a child with whom you have so much in common. Think about your dominant traits. If you both have high persistence, that goes well when you are both working together to finish a task or he is your helper of the week and wants to make sure the bulletin board is perfect. But it can cause conflict on the days when you need “just good enough” on an art project because there is a fire drill in ten minutes and this child isn’t ready to put the paints away.

Conversely, having different temperament traits can also cause conflict between you and a child with whom you are working. It is easy to see why different temperament traits could clash. A child with high intensity will feel more strongly and express more loudly than someone in the midrange. If an adult caring for the child has low intensity, it may seem like every reaction is a nuclear meltdown! Walking sounds like marching, singing sounds like screeching, and even screams of joy are hard to distinguish from screams of pain. On the other hand, if the teacher has high intensity and has big reactions to what is going on around him, a child with low intensity may be overwhelmed by the “bigness” of his sounds and actions.

A classroom will always be made up of a mixture of temperaments. Knowing your own style of relating will help you connect to a variety of differences in others, especially in the diversity of children you will serve. You will rarely have a program of all flexible personalities! As you embrace differences, you affirm children for authentically being who they are.

## Relationships and Temperament

As we consider children and the diversity of temperament styles they bring to our programs, it helps to reflect on our own dispositions to understand why we feel

the way we do about children's behaviors. Your own temperament and particularly your dominant disposition traits have had an influence on the choices you have made and the relationships you have with others in your life, professionally and personally. You may remember how, from an early age, your personality affected the way you learned in school or made friends in your neighborhood. Take a moment to consider some of the main ways in which you may have identified yourself throughout your life:

- Did you see yourself as active, shy, stubborn, resistant to change, or eager to try new things?
- Did others use some of these words when they referred to you? Were you ever labeled by an adult as hyper, hard to handle, or "an Eeyore"?
- Did you ever feel that some of your basic dispositions were at odds with your siblings or teachers at school?

Here is a personal example that I experienced growing up with high activity and high distractibility temperament traits:

In my own early school years, I spent many days with my desk pushed into the corner of the classroom or out in the hallway because I moved too much and I had a tendency to talk when I wasn't supposed to. I was highly active, so I seemed to get into a lot of trouble, getting up when I needed to be seated and so on. In the third grade, though, I had a teacher who for some reason made me the "teacher's pet," something I had never experienced. She honored my natural need to move by giving me tasks that kept my hands and mind busy. She didn't punish me for my dominant temperament trait but found ways to adapt the environment to help me be successful. I am still an active, highly distractible person, but I have found ways to make it work for me as a successful adult.

You have a unique personality that has influenced the many decisions you have made over your lifetime. You have learned over time to make adaptations and adjustments in order to be successful in your world. For example, if you have a high activity level, you may have found ways to incorporate movement into your day rather than sit at a desk. Or maybe you have chosen a career that lets you use your activity level during the course of your work. If you have high impulsivity, you may be in a position that lets you change directions throughout the day or creatively present the same activity in new ways.

In making adaptations to the way you react to the world around you, you were probably more successful if you had supportive adults like my third-grade teacher. Through the eyes of a caring and responsive adult, you learned that you were uniquely made and were celebrated for your personality. You also know that, unfortunately, this is not always the case. At other times, you may have been told



you were naughty or wrong because of who you naturally were. Some adults may have tried to squelch your natural wiring because it didn't fit their idea of a quiet child or the environment you were in. A child with high intensity can be taught skills so that when she walks it is less like marching in a parade, but she will not become someone who can sneak up on others! The goal is to help her learn and practice some quieter methods of walking when softer steps are important, knowing that her quiet is going to be different from a child who does not have high intensity.

As you consider your life and all that has occurred because of your own temperament traits and disposition, it can be the lens through which you see the children you work with and the behaviors they exhibit that challenge you at times. When we look at each child we work with, we know that all of them come to us with the same nine temperament traits that we have, on a range from high to low to somewhere in between. Some will be flexible and easy, some will be more withdrawn and fearful, and some will be active and feisty. At any given time, challenging behaviors can erupt because children are learning and practicing how to navigate complicated social worlds in child care and preschool. Children are also reacting to one another's temperament traits that are sometimes at odds with their own.

Our goal is not to fundamentally change a child or require changes that go against his basic nature. Instead, we want to offer an environment and instructions that create an atmosphere that guides positive behaviors and interactions as children gain new skills. As Berk (2013) points out,

What is important is that babies respond differently to similar circumstances. These personal behavior patterns appear to persist into childhood, affecting how others respond. Parents and caregivers play a role in the persistence of personality traits. One caregiver might regard a child as distractible, impulsive, and hard to manage while another might perceive the same child as [an] eager, active, happy-go-lucky runabout (391).

Our commitment to children needs to include a greater understanding and empathy surrounding how they each react to the world around them as we help them in their interactions with peers and with us, knowing we all have different personalities and styles of interacting. When we honor a child's unique personality, we set the stage for positive social-emotional development as he sees himself as worthy and his peers as valued.

## Influences of Environment on Temperament

Chapters 3 through 11 will include strategies early educators can implement that will help in including children with each dominant temperament trait. These strategies include environmental and programmatic adaptations. It is worth noting again that temperament is environmentally influenced as well as genetically set. The degree to which temperament is both natural and environmental is hard to measure, particularly because temperament can modify somewhat in some children as they grow. For instance, a child who is hard to soothe as an infant (negative mood, low regulation) may develop better regulatory skills that help her become a less fussy child later on. A child low on regulation will not become highly regulated, however. Research from Berk (2013) indicates that “the overall stability of temperament is low in infancy and toddlerhood and only moderate from the preschool years,” though evidence also shows that many children will remain the same temperamentally (423). Another example of how the environment can influence a child’s natural inclinations to act a certain way would be in his familiarity with a setting. A child might be quiet and subdued in the first days of a new child care setting even though her parents say she is full of energy at home. This doesn’t mean that the child’s temperament has changed; her true energy expressions will come out when she is comfortable enough to be herself. For instance, most children can keep their need to move in check for a certain period of time, but a child with a high activity level will eventually release that energy. The good news is that we can help children learn to regulate impulses that come into conflict with the setting they are in. We will examine the influence of the environment on temperament, including guidance practices, in chapter 2.

The environment can work as one of your primary tools to regulate and, to some degree, adjust children’s reactions related to temperament traits so each of them can be successful in different sorts of settings. No one child should ever be expected to behave exactly like another because of the environment, but you can help each child manage some of the ups and downs that might be related to a temperament trait through environment supports. The environment for early educators includes

- the classroom;
- the family child care program in a home setting;
- individual activity centers;
- outside play area;
- kitchen and eating areas;

- nurse's office;
- bathroom space; and
- areas used for taking a break or other quiet spaces.

This is good news for the early childhood educator because it means the child care setting can be organized in ways that enhance natural temperament traits and also prevent some of the challenging behaviors that may go along with some temperament traits.

## Organizing the Classroom to Fit Different Temperaments

Your classroom can be your first and best tool for preventing challenging behaviors before they happen. The environment can be set up in ways that help a child stay focused or use his energy in positive ways. For instance, open areas can be changed into smaller activity centers with natural barriers like bookshelves that prevent an overenergized child from running. A child who is sensitive to a lot of noise can benefit from having the quiet centers grouped near each other and the louder activity areas set together in another area of the center. Being aware of how much sensory stimulation is in the room (smell, noise, wall decorations, and so forth) and working to decrease it can help a child who has high distractibility stay focused longer.

Effective classroom organization would include a space for a child who feels overwhelmed or overstimulated to go for a break. It is up to you to make the rules for this space and how it is used and what you might include in it (books, pillows, some toys or not). A take-a-break space or quiet nook helps a child with low adaptability or low regularity learn to know his own body and exercise impulse control. Your space is now your best intervention strategy before behaviors even occur!

## Choosing Programming to Fit Different Temperaments

Your child care programming is the other area of your environment that you can organize proactively to prevent challenging behaviors. You can accomplish this through intentionally planning for children with diverse temperament types. For instance, when your programming and policies ensure that all children are consistently immersed in learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate and high quality, as well as connected to responsive caregivers who understand their needs, children will feel safe and less apt to act out. They understand that their needs will be met. Challenging behaviors may still occur, but children who trust their caregiver and feel secure in their environment can use more of their energy on regulating themselves and developing social skills. For instance,

a consistent schedule that is referred to throughout the day by the teacher builds internal regulation for all children and especially for a child who has less regulation. Programs that are disorganized and without routines will increase anxiousness in a child who already has trouble with low adaptability and low regulation, resulting in a child who refuses to move to a new activity or throws a tantrum to stay put.

You cannot control how a child has been genetically wired, a gift from her parents or grandparents, but you are able to control the classroom or family child care environment to a large degree. You can make accommodations to lighting, sound, the daily schedule, and many other features that naturally support a child's dominant traits. This is important in helping prevent or extinguish a challenging behavior before it ever happens.

Temperament is part of who a child is, naturally. Again, Berk (2013) points out that "[evidence] . . . confirms that experience can modify biologically based temperament traits considerably, although children rarely change from one extreme to another—that is, a shy preschooler practically never becomes highly sociable, and irritable children seldom become easy-going" (423). As early educators, we want to help children be the best they can be in their developmental outcomes and in social-emotional development. We want to embrace a child's unique nature and build on those strengths. This book is intended to support you with practical strategies for doing just that.

Jessica and Ivan are in the three-year-old class. They are best friends. Jessica is the first to try anything and welcomes new activities as well as new children at Busy Bees Preschool. Ivan is more reluctant to try something new until Jessica has first, but then he will join in. Jessica will show him how to do something if he has never done it before. He doesn't mind when she runs off to play with someone new because he likes to sit in the reading nook and finish his favorite book. Together they make a great team!

# Learn the nine temperament traits that influence a child's behavior

**Why Temperament Matters** addresses early childhood behavior guidance strategies related to children's specific temperament traits. There are nine temperament traits that influence a child's behavior.

- |                       |                     |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 1 Activity Level      | 6 Intensity         |
| 2 Distractibility     | 7 Regularity        |
| 3 Persistence         | 8 Sensory Awareness |
| 4 Adaptability        | 9 Mood              |
| 5 Approach/Withdrawal |                     |

Taken together, children's levels in each temperament can be grouped into three major categories of personality: easy/flexible, feisty/spirited, and slow-to-warm-up/sensitive.

**Why Temperament Matters** explains where challenging behaviors may originate in temperament, provides strategies for meeting temperament needs that prevent or lessen challenging behaviors that often lead to expulsion, and shares specific ideas about how a child care provider can adjust the early childhood program and environment to meet the individual needs of each child's temperament.



**Cindy Croft, MA**, is the founding director of the Center for Inclusive Child Care. She provides technical assistance and training to early childhood educators on adapting their physical and emotional environments to meet children's specific behavioral needs.

"This book is a must-read for both early childhood professionals and parents. Its focus on research, the importance of the adult-child relationship, and on practical strategies for supporting individuality in young children are foundational to high-quality early childhood education."

—Ann E. Bailey, PhD, director,  
Center for Early Education and  
Development, University of Minnesota

"Understanding our own temperament traits, and those of the children in our program, is an important foundation of understanding for us to best meet children where they are and support their development. This book provides practical knowledge to better understand children and provides strategies to assure their success."

—Christine Bentley, director of  
education and employment, Fraser

"Drawing on her years of direct experience in the early childhood field, Ms. Croft provides a well-laid out and in-depth guide to temperament traits and how child care providers/programs can focus their practice to address or prevent behavior challenges. She includes important reminders about how a provider's own temperament can influence their practice."

—Ann McCully, executive director,  
Child Care Aware of Minnesota