



Infant-Toddler Specialist Network (ITSN)



# Supporting Infant and Toddler Temperaments Setting the Stage

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August 2019

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The KCCTO-KITS Infant-Toddler Specialist Network is a program of the Kansas Child Care Training Opportunities, Inc. and the University of Kansas Life Span Institute at Parsons and is supported through a grant from the Kansas Department for Children and Families' Child Care and Early Education Services. However, information or opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the agency and no official endorsement should be inferred. (07/20/2017)

**REFLECTION:** How do you define temperament? How do you currently identify and support individual child and adult temperaments in your classroom/program?

Temperament describes the way you react to your world – your “personal style”. It is biologically based and part of the unique wiring of each individual’s nervous system. As a matter of fact, siblings can be (and often are) temperamentally very different. Children’s behavior and the way they interact with others is influenced by their temperament.

Children’s behavior and the way they interact with others is influenced by their temperament. Even so, children who have the same temperament type might react quite differently in similar situations, or throughout different stages in their development. A child does not choose their temperament, nor is it something that the adults in that child’s life created.

All temperamental traits, like personalities, range in intensity. So, it stands to reason that each child’s response to the environment will vary in intensity. Temperament does not change over time, but it can be influenced by many factors like a family’s cultural values and/or parenting styles (“For example, a family that values persistence (the ability to stick to a task and keep trying) may be more likely to praise and reward a child for “sticking with” a challenging task (such as a puzzle)”)(Allard & Hunter, 2010) or the child’s interactions with the environment (“For example, if a child is cared for in an environment that places a high priority on scheduling predictable sleeping, eating, and diapering/toileting experiences, a child whose biological functions are somewhat irregular might, over time, begin to sleep, eat, and eliminate more regularly.”)(Allard & Hunter, 2010). As children grow, develop, and learn to interact with others, shifts in temperament might occur.

A child’s behavior may remind you of parts of yourself or others that you don’t like so much and want to change (i.e., Susan is an author who frequently has her books criticized in the media. Her personality allows her to overlook the unkind statements and focus on ways to improve her writing). Conversely, you may feel discomfort in the ways your child is very different from you (i.e., Susan’s daughter falls apart every time someone says an unkind word to her or her mother). This major different in their personalities can sometimes make it difficult for Susan to meet her daughter’s needs. No one temperament is either “good” or “bad”. It is important to know that adults cannot force a change to a child’s temperament. Instead, we must support each child’s development by recognizing, valuing, and integrating the unique traits that each child has, rather than trying to change a child’s temperamental traits.

Researchers have identified nine common traits used to describe temperament in young children. They are: Activity Level, Distractibility, Intensity, Regularity, Sensitivity, Approachability, Adaptability, Persistence, Mood.

Let’s take a look at the definitions of each trait - [IT3 Temperament Traits](https://www.ecmhc.org/temperament/traits.html)  
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(see Infant Toddler Temperament Tool)

Based upon the nine traits you just reviewed, researchers have created three “types” of temperament:

- Easy-going
  - o 40% of children identify with this category
- Slow-to-warm
  - o 15% of children identify with this category
- Active/Feisty
  - o 10% of children identify with this category

Not all children's temperaments fall neatly into one of the three types described, approximately 35% of children are a blend of one or more “types” of temperaments.

Children described as “Easy Going” tend to be:

- Happy; not easily upset
- Regular in sleeping and eating habits
- Adaptable; adjust easily to new situations
- Active
- Less likely to demand attention and make her needs or distress known

Children described as “Slow-to-Warm” tend to be:

- Less active or tend to be fussy
- Withdrawn or react negatively to new situations; need extra time to adjust to new situations
- Over time, more positive with repeated exposure to a new person, object, or situation.
- Generally observant
- Calm

Children described as “Active/Feisty” tend to be:

- Irregular in feeding and sleeping habits, fussy
- Fearful of new people and situations – or – have never met a stranger
- Easily upset or distracted by noise and stimulation
- Intense in their reactions
- Full of zest in their approach to life
- Those that thrive on order and predictable routines to feel safe and secure

### Why is it important to have knowledge of each child's temperament?

Temperamental knowledge helps us better understand individual differences and how we react and relate to the world. We are able to further identify strengths and the supports needed to be successful. When we are aware of our temperament and that of the children in our care we are better able to aid in the expression of individual preferences, desires, and feelings appropriately.

### "Goodness of Fit"

"Goodness of Fit" refers to the compatibility between adult and child temperaments. This does not mean that adult and child temperaments have to match or that the adult has to change who they are. This compatibility happens when adults adjust their expectations and caregiving strategies to match the child's temperament style and abilities, becoming a positive support to that child's natural way of responding to her world.

Understanding "Goodness of Fit" helps caregivers to:

- Avoid blaming themselves or the child for reactions/behaviors that are typical based on that child's temperament
- Learn to anticipate issues before they occur
- Avoid frustrating themselves and the child using approaches that don't match the child's temperament

Creating a "Goodness of Fit" with all children in your classroom involves:

- Understanding your own temperament and preferences, helping you to take the child's perspective. (For example, a caregiver who enjoys movement, loud music playing, and constant bustle might try to imagine what it would feel like to spend all day in a setting that was calm, hushed, and quiet.). This reflective process can help you become more attuned to the experience of each child within your care. You can then determine what adjustments might be needed to create a better fit for each child.
- Continuing to build relationships with families to learn more about the child and his/her home environment. Share what you have learned about temperament with families and provide information about temperamental traits. Discussing each temperamental trait with families helps you to learn more about the child's temperament and the family's cultural values. Providing families knowledge of temperaments helps them to identify their child's individual temperament and to see each child's approach to the world through a positive lens. Listen to how the family feels about the temperament characteristics of their child. Share with families what you have learned about goodness of fit, and share your strategies, such as individualizing nap schedules for your program. As you learn which traits are highly valued by each family, you can partner with them to determine an appropriate balance between the child's temperament, the family's preferences, and the policies of the program.
- Recognizing, valuing, and integrating the unique traits of each child's individual temperament when planning daily routines and schedules.

As discussed above, it is important that you have an understanding of your own temperament, along with the temperaments of the children in your care, in order to build relationships and help children be successful.

While there are many great sites and tools that you can use when rating for temperament, the next section of this Technical Assistance packet will focus on the use of the “Infant Toddler Temperament Tool (IT3)” created by the Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation.