

HOW ARE THE  
CHILDREN?  
THEY ARE ALL  
DIFFERENT!



Did you ever wonder why children, born with the same parents and growing up in the same house, could be so different? **It's probably due to temperament.**

Baby Henry is a year old. He has a 3-year-old sister who is typically happy, sociable, and a joy to be with. Henry cries A LOT! He doesn't sleep much, has intense reactions to loud sounds and bright lights, and is extremely active. He's easily frustrated and hard to comfort. His parents are exhausted. His mom feels like she's a bad mother and is beginning to dread her time with Henry.

**Every child is born with his own individual way of approaching the world**—also known as “temperament.” Temperament shapes a child's development and relationships in significant ways, so understanding a child's temperament is very important for nurturing his healthy development. Henry and his sister have the same family and home, but they are very different. Henry is more challenging to raise than his sister, but he is not a “bad baby”.

There are five primary temperament characteristics—emotional intensity and reactivity, activity level, sociability, ability to cope with change, and frustration tolerance. **Temperament is not something your child chooses, nor is it something that you created.** A child's temperament shapes the way he experiences the world:

- ◆ Easy babies—happy mood, moderate or low intensity, adaptable
- ◆ Challenging babies—high activity level, intense emotions, irritable, resistant to change
- ◆ Slow-to-warm-up babies—fearful at first but warm up, cautious

It's not hard to see that challenging babies could have a hard time in life. Serve-and-return interactions are harder with a child who reacts intensely and is easily distracted. Parents might need help to learn different ways to positively connect with their child and develop a secure bond or attachment. But a challenging temperament does not need to signal persistent difficulties in life. In fact, **if supported well, these children might grow into the adults who can change our world.**

The key to healthy development is a “**goodness of fit**” between a child's temperament and her environment. **There are no “bad” babies or “bad” parents but there are “bad fits”.** If a sociable parent has a shy and low-energy child, parties and loud family gatherings are often frustrating and embarrassing. The child cannot be who the parent wants her to be any more than the parent can be less outgoing. The child is fine, the parents are fine, but the “fit” is not. Although adults can do little to change a child's temperament, they can help the child change her reaction to her home, childcare setting, or school environment, easing the child into new ways of being and behaving.

**Back to Henry.** His development could go in very different directions depending upon the level of support his family receives. A baby with a difficult temperament born to a parent with a difficult temperament may become engaged in a downward spiral—the parent’s inability to comfort the child decreases the parent’s confidence and increases frustration or even anger.

Babies need adults to respond to their needs, delight in them, and help them feel safe. The risks for insecure attachment, or even child abuse, increase when babies’ cries cannot be soothed in the usual ways. Babies whose needs are not met may become louder, angrier, and more difficult to handle, or they can withdraw. Adults might pull away just at the time the baby needs them most. Babies like Henry often develop challenging behaviors that might interfere with family relationships, schooling, and acceptance—**patterns that can last through one’s lifetime.**

**Take Two.** Henry’s parents get support from a home visitor who helps them learn different ways to soothe Henry and give him outlets for his boundless energy. They learn that they are not bad parents, and that Henry is telling them what he needs in the only ways he can. While they can’t change his reactions, they can change their approaches and the environments where he spends time—turning down the TV, turning off bright lights, taking him outside when he is fussy. When parents learn these skills, their babies tend to grow into toddlers who feel good about themselves and safe in the world. Again, **there are no “good or bad temperaments” but there are “good and bad fits”.**

**How can we help? Be a champion for all children!** The goal isn’t to change a child’s temperament, but to help him make the most of his unique temperament—both its strengths and the areas where he may need more support. When parents, caregivers, and teachers look for the strengths in each temperament and provide opportunities that match the child, they help to reduce confining expectations, frustration, and shame. **How can adults help children build confidence, initiative, and independence?** Help a quiet child shine or transition more smoothly through changes. Give an energetic child physical tasks that match her level of activity. Lend a hand or sympathetic word to an overwhelmed parent.

**Our communities depend on people who are all different, with complimentary temperaments, skills, and approaches to problem-solving.** If Henry were growing up in an orphanage, he’d likely be one of the survivors as the noisy children get fed. If he were growing up in a remote village, he’d be cared for by family and neighbors who together would figure out how to support him. Think of our Peninsula and Island towns as villages. Let’s work together to ensure every baby grows into the competent and valuable “village” member we all need.

Resources for you:

- Zero to Three information on temperament and a **video for parents and caregivers**—what we need to know and helpful approaches to children with challenging and slow-to-warm up temperaments: <https://www.zerotothree.org/espanol/temperament>
- Early Childhood Consultation and Outreach program (ECCO)—Free consultation services for early childhood teachers and parents of children 18 mos–8 years. [www.healthyacadia.org](http://www.healthyacadia.org)  
**207/667-7171**

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