

## Temperament and Goodness of Fit

“Temperament” and “goodness of fit” are two concepts which can help parents understand their child’s behavior and support their child’s social and emotional development. A child’s temperament is his or her behavioral style. It is “how” children respond to their environment rather than “why” they do things. For example, some children persist with an activity and others are easily distracted. Some respond very intensely and others respond very mildly to the same stimulus. The concept of temperament is related to personality. Personality is perhaps best understood as a combination of the child’s temperament and his or her experiences over time.

We owe a good deal of our current understanding about temperament to Drs. Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess. Their study, the New York Longitudinal Study, tracked a number of specific characteristics (such as activity level, adaptability, mood, persistence, regularity and intensity of response) in typically developing children. Thomas and Chess recognized that about two thirds of children fit into one of three specific temperaments:

- Easy
- Difficult
- Slow-to-warm-up.

The remaining one third of children showed a combination of these characteristics. Some professionals have questioned the use of the terms “easy” and “difficult,” because they consider them stigmatizing. In this course, we use the terms “adaptable,” “intense,” and “slow-to-warm-up” to refer to the three primary temperamental types.

### Adaptable children:

- Are generally positive and content.
- Adapt to change with little protesting.
- Usually have regular eating and sleeping habits.

### In contrast, intense children:

- Are often active and easily frustrated.
- Respond intensely to change or limits.
- Have irregular eating and sleep habits.

### Slow-to-warm-up children:

- Appear cautious.
- Withdraw or react negatively to new situations.
- Will respond positively with repeated experience.

Understanding a child's temperament can help parents develop appropriate expectations for their child's behavior in certain situations. They can adjust their parenting style and be much more effective as parents, and their children will be less frustrated. For example, if a preschooler has a slow-to-warm-up temperament, parents should expect that they will need to spend extra time helping their child adjust to a new school. They will likely need to attend the school for part of the day for one or more days as the child adjusts. Similarly, the child who has an intense temperament may show oppositional and aggressive behavior in preschool. Parents can help teachers understand the child's temperament so the child can successfully adapt to the school environment.

Goodness of fit refers to how well the child's temperament matches the parent's temperament, or even that of his teacher. Adults have specific behavioral styles or temperaments just like children.

Just imagine a child with an intense temperament living with a parent who also is easily frustrated, responds intensely, and follows an irregular schedule! That's a poor fit, which may result in many negative interactions and in the child becoming increasingly oppositional and aggressive. The parent will need a good deal of support to modify his or her way of doing things so that the child can be successful.

Now imagine that same child with the intense temperament having a parent who is flexible and has a positive mood and high frustration tolerance. That would be a good fit for the child. A similar situation could occur at school. Imagine again the intense child who has a low frustration tolerance paired with a no-nonsense, rigid teacher. A much better fit would be a teacher who is adaptable and willing to help the child develop problem-solving skills, so the child can get some of what he wants and also follow through with the demands of school.

*\*The information discussed in this handout was adapted in part from The Preventive Ounce ([www.preventiveoz.org](http://www.preventiveoz.org)) and Zero to Three ([www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)).*