

TEMPERAMENT: THE BASIS OF OUR PERSONALITY

A topic of interest to parents and teachers



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When we think of our families and other people we know well, we would be able to describe their characteristics, particularly what their personality is like. For example, one may be described as happy, outgoing, easy to get along with and adaptable, while the other as shy, difficult to talk to and not so easy to get along with – complete opposites.

Think about your own family. If you have a sister or brother, are they similar to you?

How different are their personalities from you?

From our understanding of human development, we would know that personality has its origins in temperament. Consistent, predictable patterns of behaviour in a person can be described as their temperament. Any mother or father who has had two or more children would tell you how different the temperament of these babies are from birth. Temperament variations have been of interest to researchers for decades. Consistent temperamental traits can be seen in infants as young as two to three months.

In 1970 Thomas, Chess and Birch, in a landmark study, published a paper *The Origin of Personality* in the journal entitled *Scientific American*. The paper was based on the results of findings of a longitudinal study that began in 1956 with 141 infants and continued through to adulthood. Through this study, the researchers developed techniques for analysing individual differences in the behaviour of infants.

In summary, Thomas, Chess and Birch (1970) stated there were nine characteristics that could be reliably scored and rated on the behaviour of infants. These temperament characteristics could be grouped to identify three types of infants:

Table 1

Easy babies – who adjust easily to new situations, quickly establish routines, are cheerful and easy to calm. (about 40% of infants)

Difficult babies – who are slow to adjust to new experiences, likely to react negatively and intensely to situations. (about 10% of babies)

Slow to warm up babies – who are somewhat difficult at first but become easier over time. (about 15% of babies)

Some 35% of babies do not fit neatly into any of these categories.

While the dimensions of temperament have been refined since the 1970 publication, the main categories seem to have stood the test of time. Berk's 2018 text, *Child Development*, uses the temperament categorisation in Table 1.

Other interesting findings

Temperament is viewed today by most developmental psychologists as being biologically based.

There is consistency of behaviour – motor, reactions, self-regulation - over situations and over time.

Temperament remains stable over childhood. A large Australian based temperament study that has been ongoing now for 30 years with over 2000 participants from birth, presents evidence that temperament tends to remain stable. It is one of the few studies in the world on temperament with information about young people, their parents and now, the young people's own children.

One of the key findings summarised from the Australian Temperament Study states that very few children's temperament changes radically over time (Vassallo & Sanson, 2013).

Is it important for parents and teachers to know about temperament?

- Yes, understanding children's development, including temperament, enables us to understand what contributes to wellbeing. That is why some children develop into well-adjusted, healthy, resilient young adults, while others develop life-long social/emotional problems.
- Knowledge of temperament can help parents and teachers understand the factors that help or hinder healthy development. If an infant or child is "difficult" from birth and if the mother also has difficulties in parenting, then there can be on-going problems present for the infant and later during childhood and adolescence.
- Early identification and treatment of children, for example for anxiety or depression, may reduce the likelihood of problems becoming entrenched.
- Children with anxiety or depression are more likely to overcome symptoms if they develop good social skills, experience positive parent and peer relationships and do well in school.
- Temperament can be modified through parent responses, which are tied to their parenting style.

Berk (2018) explains Thomas and Chess's (1977) 'goodness-of-fit model' that proposes how temperament and environmental pressures can together produce favourable outcomes. This involves creating child rearing environments that recognise each child's temperament while encouraging adaptive behaviour.

Discussion points for teachers

Knowing that a child finds it difficult to adapt can help teachers to make allowances for that particular child within the limits of their classroom routines, teachings and learnings.

Given the demands teachers have, we cannot expect them to change their teaching style to suit the temperaments of diverse groups of children. However, if there an extreme case arises then referral to specialised care may be necessary.

Children who are negative, impulsive and who have poor self-regulation skills are often in conflict with their peers. Teachers may find it difficult to provide positive guidance for them given that they have many other children in their teaching groups that they also need to care for.

However, teachers of children in the birth-to-three years need to use teaching strategies that match to the developmental needs of the children.

For example, being part of a group of children entails emotional demands placed on toddlers. This is why the RBC curriculum promotes acceptance of individual differences in children and focusses on developmental learning outcomes rather than rigid academic outcomes.

The development of self-regulation is extremely important for healthy overall development. Allowing young children to have choices facilitate positive self-regulation.

Initial teacher education programs and training need to include temperament as part of the study of human development.

Current Research in NTUC First Campus

The Follow Through Study of the Relationships Based Curriculum is assessing a sample of children over a three-year period using different measures. One of the measures includes tracking children's temperament over three years to see if, indeed, the findings concur with other current research. It is too early to share any findings regarding the temperaments of the cohort of children in this study. However, this data will be very important because it may provide information on how the temperament of the children in the sample have developed during the three years of the study.

Also, the study findings will have applied teaching implications for the birth-to-three year age group.

If readers are interested in finding out more about temperament, the following references are suggested.

References

- Berk, L. E. (2018). *Child Development* (10th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
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