

Talking Temperament

The concept of temperament underlies all Roots of Empathy lessons. Once an Instructor understands the theory of temperament, the next challenge is to talk about it and demonstrate it to students. Many Instructors find it hard to explain. The following resource pages provide some language to use when talking about temperament with Roots of Empathy students.

What is Temperament?

During the first Family Visit, while observing baby's reactions, explain:

- The way our baby is (insert what you see happening, e.g.: crying during our singing, laughing at our faces, clinging to mom, etc.) may not be the same way another baby would react. Other babies might (insert: cry softer, frown instead of smile, feel comfortable moving away from mom, etc.)
- Babies react to situations and people in their own special way. This is because every baby is born with a different temperament.
- All of you have a temperament that's different from everyone else's. Some of you may (take the baby examples above and translate them to examples from the students' world, e.g.: some of you may be nervous when you come into a room of strangers but some of you may find it easy to meet new people right away, etc.)
- We are all unique. Nobody is exactly like you.
- When we learn about other people's temperaments, we understand them better.

"The world is like an orchestra; some musical instruments may be percussive and loud and some may be gentle and tinkly, but when played together, the orchestra makes beautiful music."

-Mary Gordon, Founder/President, Roots of Empathy

Walking the Talk

During Family Visits, always reinforce temperament within the context of the baby's actions and reactions, moving towards defining their behaviour by traits. Then immediately bridge this learning to the students personally with examples from their everyday life.

Attached is a revised chart of temperament traits found in your Resource Manual. Use the descriptions in the 2nd and 3rd columns to compose your questions when observing the baby.

Distractibility

For example, during a Family Visit, you could give a toy to your Roots of Empathy baby, then place another at the other end of the blanket and watch what she does. Ask the students, "What did the baby do when I showed her another toy? Did she lose interest in the first toy and want the second? Or was she still interested in the original toy? You can then ask them, "Are you able to focus on your work at school or do you get easily distracted by what's going on around you?"

Talking Temperament

Persistence

During a Family Visit, you could encourage your Roots of Empathy baby to approach a toy. When he comes close, move it further down the blanket for him to have to continue to crawl to get it. Have the students count how many times the baby tries to get the toy before frustration sets in. Ask the students, "How do we know the baby is frustrated (i.e. cries, looks at mom etc.)?" If he starts to cry, give the toy to the baby and pass him over to his mother. Comment on how the mother regulates her baby's emotions. You can then ask the students, "When you are doing something that is difficult, such as a hard puzzle, do you keep going until it is finished or do you get frustrated and give up?"

Mood and First Reaction are often difficult traits to describe because they have been categorized according to Chess and Thomas's research study as being positive or negative. For these two traits, rather than describing the trait, just identify the behaviours which are associated with the trait.

Mood

For example, with mood, comment if the baby is smiling a lot or looking serious today and if that's the same way she is on most visits. Ask the parent if the baby wakes up with big smiles or in a more serious mood. Babies who are more serious appear to be observing, thinking and reflecting. In Roots of Empathy we sometimes refer to them as "philosopher kings". In Roots of Empathy a baby's mood can also be thought of as sunny "sunrise" or serious "sunset". Both are just as beautiful!

First Reaction

For example, with first reaction, comment if the baby tends to be adventurous or cautious. During a Family Visit, create a tunnel with the Roots of Empathy blanket. You can do this by lifting up the middle of each side of the blanket for the baby to crawl through. You can lift one side and the classroom teacher can lift the other. Have the children and mother gather around one end of the blanket, while you and the baby are on the opposite end. Is the baby adventurous (i.e. crawls right through)? Or does he need a lot of encouragement (i.e. shaking a toy at the other end, having mom call him over etc.)? Is he cautious and just sits there staring into the tunnel?

One example of this in the Roots of Empathy curriculum occurs in theme eight. During the Family Visit, we orchestrate the introduction of a new food to observe the baby's first reaction. Adventurous babies generally embrace novelty, such as new foods. Cautious babies generally reject new foods. This is why some children prefer to eat the same lunch every day rather than trying new exotic foods or insist on wearing the same t-shirt each day rather than a different one. It is also the reason why some adults choose the same restaurant rather than trying the new one in town!

Talking Temperament

Another Lens on Temperament

Younger Students

Younger children can easily understand the key principles of temperament as outlined previously under "What is temperament?" Use the word "temperament" often, within the context of something the children can see, but don't expect kindergarten children to be able to explain it to you. You can also use the names of the traits in your oral communication but it is not important that the students repeat back the trait titles or explain their meanings. Your reference to and demonstration of the traits will reinforce the character of the baby and the uniqueness of themselves.

Older Students

Older students often want to know if their temperament can change. They might ask because there is something about their temperament that they don't like. For instance, a child with ADHD might see his/her very high levels of activity as a negative quality. Or a child who feels shy might want to be more outgoing. It's important that children believe in themselves and their abilities. Temperament traits are neither good nor bad, and all can be seen as strengths. Children who have been labelled 'hyperactive' because they have a high activity level are often great explorers and participate in many sports. Children with a low activity level will be relieved to learn they are not lazy. A highly persistent child who may be seen as pushy, will be very goal-oriented in life.

Although temperament is innate, we learn, over time, to emphasize or subdue our traits depending on the situation and our goals. Temperament is also heavily influenced by the child's social and emotional environment which is mediated by their parents. One of the most complex tasks of parenting is understanding the compilation or "goodness of fit" between their temperament traits and those of their children. Sensitive parenting allows for expression of the individuality of the child to be tempered by respect for others. You can assure students that their destiny is not set in stone and that many other factors influence who they are.

Talking Temperament

Temperament Traits

Based on Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas's Longitudinal Study (from the late 1950s)

With updates from *Roots of Empathy, Changing the World, Child by Child*.

TRAIT	BABY	CHILD
ACTIVITY LEVEL: The amount of motor activity as well as the proportion of active and inactive periods.	High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> moves often and enthusiastically splashes in bath and squirms in high chair Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> moves slowly and less often, sits still in high chair or comfortably in parent's lap can roll over, but seldom does 	High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> after school will want to go out and play an active game or sport Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> will quietly work on a puzzle or read a book
INTENSITY: The degree of energy or emotion with which a person responds to a situation.	High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> responses are strong and dramatic; cries loudly or squeals with delight Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> mellow in reactions is more subtle responds mildly; fusses rather than cries, and smiles rather than laughs 	High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> situations are either great or horrible has no middle gear is more difficult to live with Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is more calm in reactions is more subtle in responses may be incorrectly seen as being unenthusiastic is easier to live with
SENSITIVITY: (Threshold of Responsiveness): The level of sensory stimulation required to get a reaction.	High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is keenly aware of surroundings reacts to changes in noise level, temperature, texture, and handling wakes up at the slightest sound Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> sleeps through loud noises change in light or temperature, or wet or dirty diaper doesn't bother him/her does not register discomfort by crying if he or she is too hot or cold 	High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> complains of socks being too tight, or the label on the back of shirts scratching notices emotions on people's faces may react to approval or disapproval, feelings easily hurt Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is not bothered by physical discomfort is not attuned to emotions on people's faces scratched knee doesn't bother him/her

Above are some examples of the extremes on the continuum of each temperament trait.

Talking Temperament

Temperament Traits

Based on Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas's Longitudinal Study (from the late 1950s)

With updates from *Roots of Empathy, Changing the World, Child by Child*.

TRAIT	BABY	CHILD
FIRST REACTION: "Approach Withdrawal": The first reaction to a situation, person, or thing.	Positive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> will smile or reach out in some way to new people, in new places or situations is open to trying new foods Negative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is cautious in new situations or with new people will spit out or push away new foods 	Positive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is adventurous readily makes and visits new friends Negative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> reacts strongly against a new school and/or teacher does not want to go to a new friend's house is cautious in making new friends
ADAPTABILITY: How easily a person adjusts to a situation.	High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> transitions are effortless adapts to change easily sleeps in new places with no problem Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> transitions are difficult has difficulty adjusting to a new caregiver cries when going to sleep or waking up 	High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> goes with the flow easily adjusts to a new bed when on holidays moves easily from playing to sitting down for dinner Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> takes time settling in gets very upset when family plans change difficulty with disappointment
MOOD: A person's general disposition.	Positive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> sunny disposition "sunrise" smiles often Negative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is serious in mood "sunset" 	Positive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> smiles a lot is outgoing and optimistic Negative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> has a more serious expression when meeting new people may tend to whine or complain often appears to be dreaming or in serious thought

Above are some examples of the extremes on the continuum of each temperament trait.

Talking Temperament

Temperament Traits

Based on Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas's Longitudinal Study (from the late 1950s)

With updates from *Roots of Empathy, Changing the World, Child by Child*.

TRAIT	BABY	CHILD
PERSISTENCE: The tendency to continue with an activity, despite frustration.	High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> highly persistent babies have an incredible ability to focus on a task and stick with it even when they are not having success will practice standing and walking despite falling Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is easily frustrated when presented with a task (such as above) - will stop task, cry or throw object 	High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> continues to practice new skills, whether sports, academics or musical instruments, despite difficulty Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> will easily get frustrated and give up after a few failures, eg., when starting dance lessons, will quit after the first few lessons if the child feels he/she is not successful gives up on trying to solve a difficult math problem
DISTRACTIBILITY: How easily a person can be drawn away from an activity.	High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is easily redirected from an activity by a caregiver singing or offering a toy is easily pacified through redirection when upset Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is not easily diverted from something he/she is doing cannot be distracted from an upset by gentle bouncing or singing 	High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> homework is always a challenge, as the child is frequently distracted Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> will focus on completing an activity despite many distractions
RHYTHMICITY (REGULARITY): The predictability or unpredictability of biological functions.	High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> has an internal alarm clock; eating, sleeping, and toileting occur in a predictable pattern Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> will wake up early one morning and sleep late the next parent never knows when baby will be hungry or when he/she will go to sleep 	High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> creates and follows routines easily is well-organized has predictable behaviour Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is disorganized with school work has difficulty being on time finds routines hard to follow

Above are some examples of the extremes on the continuum of each temperament trait.