

Parenting Revolution

Toddler Edition

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ACTIVITY SHEET



Despite the fact that 250 babies are born into the world every minute, not one of them is the same. Beyond looks, each baby is unique in temperament. The majority of toddlers are fairly easy going, calm and adaptable. However, some children can be a little more challenging, which can make the parenting journey somewhat more stressful. While your child's temperament is innate, there's an important role you can play in managing your child's moods and behaviour. This session explores the theory and science behind your child's temperament and considers a few parenting strategies you may wish to add to your parenting toolkit.



PROGRAM DESIGN AND OBJECTIVES SUMMARY

This session is designed to help you:

- (a)** understand the difference between temperament and personality
- (b)** learn the three main factors that help regulate your child's temperament
- (c)** effectively deal with temperaments that are 'difficult to manage'.

Temperament versus Personality

Temperament and personality are not the same. Rather, temperament is one of the building blocks that makes up your toddler's personality. Temperament refers to the way in which your child adapts to their environment, interacts with others, expresses emotion and stays on task. Despite temperament being innate (governed by your child's biology), the good news is that your toddler can learn to manage their temperament.

There are three classic grades of temperament:



EASY

Children with an “easy” temperament tend to be fairly predictable, calm and adaptable. They approach new experiences with positive expectations and a gentle manner. They bounce back quickly when things don't go their way.



SLOW TO ADJUST

Children with a “slow to adjust” temperament may be pickier with their foods, less predictable with their sleep, and more easily overwhelmed when facing new situations. They may also be stand-offish and shy when meeting new people.



DIFFICULT

Children with a “difficult” temperament experience similar intolerance to those “slow to adjust”. However, their emotional behavioural response is much more intense. Approximately 12% of toddlers have a “difficult” temperament.

DIFFERENCES IN TEMPERAMENT ARE NOT ONLY PRESENT FROM BIRTH, THEY'RE ALSO ABLE TO BE OBSERVED BEFORE A CHILD IS BORN. EVEN THOUGH TEMPERAMENT IS INNATE, THE WAY A PARENT INTERACTS WITH THE TEMPERAMENT OF THEIR CHILD CAN POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY INFLUENCE THE CHILD'S ADJUSTMENT.

Modification versus Adaptation

Even though your child is influenced by their biologically wired temperament, there are a number of factors that help manage your child's temperament. Parents play an important role in helping to lead, harness and at times, redirect energy. The goal is not to change your child, but rather help regulate their emotions and behaviours.

To know where parental guidance and assistance may be warranted, consider the following factors that help make up your child's temperament:



SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Social engagement (sociability) is the tendency for your child to either be shy or outgoing when meeting or interacting with new people, going into new environments or engaging social settings (e.g. welcoming visitors into your home, starting pre-school, attending children's church, having play dates, or going to parties). When assessing your child's social engagement, consider (1) how well do they approach new people/situations; and (2), how easily do they adapt to or fit in with environmental changes.



EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY

Emotional reactivity refers to how excited your toddler gets when anticipating something fun or thrilling, or how frustrated/disappointed they may become when things don't go their way. When assessing emotional reactivity, consider your child's: (1) Mood (cheerful and happy disposition versus unhappy and unfriendly disposition); (2) Responsiveness (how strong a stimulus needs to be to evoke an emotional response); and (3) Intensity (the level of energy they inject into their emotional reaction).



PERSISTENCE / SELF-REGULATION

Persistence and self-regulation are defined as your toddler's ability to (1) continually engage an activity (behavioural discipline) and (2) maintain attention and stay on task (mental discipline), despite distractions. However, distractions not only relate to external influences, but how well your toddler is able to internally self-regulate (e.g. when upset, how easily they can be distracted away from their tears with a shift in stimulus, helping them self-soothe and develop a new emotional disposition).

SNAPSHOT Assessment

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT ✓

	Not very	Moderate	Very
How confident would your child feel to meet new people?			
How well would your toddler engage other children in a playground?			
How easily would your toddler adapt to their bedroom being rearranged?			
How well would your child adjust to a change in carer/teacher/babysitter?			

EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY ✓

How well does your toddler contain their excitement when awaiting a gift?			
When upset about a broken toy/lost teddy, how well do they move on?			
How hurt (i.e. cut or scrape) does your child need to be before they cry?			
How contained are your child's emotions when they can't get their way?			

PERSISTENCE / SELF-REGULATION ✓

How well is your child able to remain focused when playing or drawing?			
How easily are you able to distract your toddler to shift focus when upset?			
How well is your child able to sit still on the chair when getting a haircut?			
When reading to your child, how well do they stay focused on the story?			

BASED ON THE ABOVE SNAPSHOT ASSESSMENT:

Q. What aspects of your child's temperament may require additional support?



Which of the following strategies may be beneficial for your child's development? ✓

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Find activities your toddler enjoys and invite others to participate		Practice role playing going to new places and meeting new people	
Encourage your toddler to ask people questions (e.g. what's your name?)		Model to your child how to ask someone if you can play with them	
Visit less-familiar environments with your child (i.e. different playground)		Encourage your child to be the carer/teacher/babysitter's helper	

EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY

Practice delayed gratification (i.e. clean up before dinner; desert after the meal)		Validate feelings/concern/loss but provide a time limit for being sad/upset	
Help develop empathy by considering how others might feel		Teach your child how to wash/dry their injury, and put on their own band-aid	
When feeling upset, take some breaths together, go for a walk, have a drink		Don't always give in to demands. Practice 'saying no' and 'staying no'.	

PERSISTENCE / SELF-REGULATION

Set your child up with focus activities (i.e. drawing, puzzle, build block tower)		When feeling upset, distract your child with excitement ("hey, guess what?")	
Provide an incentive for sitting still and being quiet (i.e. at the doctor's office)		While reading a story, give your child a back/head scratch to reward focus	
Give your child activities to complete with focused tasks (i.e. find it, join dots)		Mini-treasure hunts. Grand prize only given when all items have been found	



IF YOUR CHILD IS ONE OF THE 12% WHOSE TEMPERAMENT IS CONSIDERED DIFFICULT, DO NOT DESPAIR! BY EMBRACING THREE SPECIFIC PARENTING TACTICS, YOUR CHILD CAN LEARN TO INCREASE THEIR TOLERANCE FOR THE THINGS WHICH THEY WOULD OTHERWISE FIND UNCOMFORTABLE OR DIFFICULT TO DEAL WITH.

01 Stay Calm

02 Focus on Strength

03 Take Small Steps

01 Stay Calm

Staying calm when your toddler is being difficult is easier said than done! As your child's emotions rise, your fight/flight response is triggered (releasing a surge of stress hormones into your body). However, the same thing is simultaneously likely to be happening in your toddler. Once activated, remaining calm and staying in control can be challenging. But remember, you set the emotional thermostat in your home. If you take steps to calm yourself, your toddler is more likely to follow suit. However, staying stressed/anxious/frustrated will only serve to escalate your situation. Therefore, use the emotional regulation cheat-sheet below to help you stay calm.

BODY

Q. What are you feeling in your body?

EXAMPLE: Heart racing, fast breathing, feeling hot, tense, sick, exhausted/fatigued

FEELINGS

Q. What specific emotion is fuelling me?

EXAMPLE: Scared, stressed, angry, sad, frustrated, annoyed, anxious, nervous.

THOUGHTS

Q. What is racing through my mind?

EXAMPLE: What thoughts are influencing my feelings? What am I saying to myself?

ACTIONS

Q. What action you feel like taking?

Q. Will this really be helpful?

SELF-COMPASSION

Q. What activities would provide respite?

EXAMPLE: Invite spouse/friend/in-law to tag-team parent. Go for a walk, play music, pray, have a rest, run a bath, read a book

RE-FOCUS

Q. What's a helpful way of thinking about and responding to this situation?

EXAMPLE: What could you do differently if/when you encounter the same situation? What advice would you give a friend?

02 Focus on Strengths

Focusing on your child's behaviour is like watering a garden – whatever plants (behaviours) you water (focus on) will grow. Spending time and energy, therefore, dwelling on and pointing out your toddler's difficulties (ie. sleeping, eating, socialising or tantrums), serves to reinforce these issues and can be detrimental to your child's sense of self-worth (especially as they get older). However, by focusing on their strengths, your change in outlook will impact your physiology and emotions as well. Moreover, pointing out your child's strengths helps them grow in confidence, and increases the likelihood of them engaging more positive behaviours.



What are your toddler's greatest strengths? List the top 5 things you love most about them:

01

02

03

04

05

Q. What are some things you could do this week to nurture these strengths?

HINT: Verbally encourage them; do an activity together that highlights those strengths

03 Take Small Steps

No matter how strict your parenting style may be, you cannot change your child's temperament. However, by setting behavioural goals and taking small, consistent steps (gradually exposing your child to the things they find socially and emotionally difficult), you can increase your child's tolerance to new, novel and unpredictable experiences. It's important to approach this with a 'no pressure' attitude, and to not push your child too far beyond their comfort zone. For really difficult temperaments, consider targeting one specific behaviour at a time by making a new Exposure Hierarchy (see Session 2).

Consider the following 'small step' examples for different challenging scenarios:

PICKY EATER

Add a new food onto their dinner plate (presented in different ways) each night over the course of a week (irrespective of whether they touch, play with or eat it)

NEW PLACES

Add to your routine a fun adventure - where you go somewhere new once per week (e.g. café, pool, playground or ice cream parlour). Keep it light-hearted.

Combine an activity your child loves to do (i.e. collect shells at beach, kick a ball in the park, chase birds, have a picnic) and invite someone new to join in on the fun.

NEW PEOPLE

If your child has difficulty stopping an activity (i.e., watching a cartoon or playing games), give them a 3-minute wind up. To manage expectations, set an alarm at 3x 1-minute intervals).

STOPPING PLAY

BONUS TIPS

1. GO AT YOUR CHILD'S PACE AND KEEP IT FUN
2. FIND A TEACHING STYLE THAT YOUR CHILD RESPONDS TO
3. SET SMALL, BITE-SIZE ACHIEVABLE GOALS
4. LOOK FOR EVERYDAY OPPORTUNITIES TO PRACTICE
5. FOCUS ON THE WINS. GIVE ENCOURAGEMENT!