



# Learning About Your Baby's Temperament

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Your baby's temperament strongly influences how you feel about yourself as a parent. If your baby cuddles you and looks you in the face, you feel that your baby likes you, that you are a "good" parent. If your baby stiffens away from you when held and cries when you handle him and try to get him to look at your face, you feel that your baby doesn't like you, that you must be a "bad" parent.

Babies are born with individual personalities and styles of interacting. If you do not know your baby's particular behaviors, you will find her very confusing. Once you understand your baby's behaviors and patterns of responding, you can respond more appropriately and enjoy more satisfying interactions with your baby. This builds mutual trust which is important to attachment and bonding.

Sometimes mothers feel that they can sense the temperament of their baby

while they are pregnant, that they know what to expect from their child. This information is usually based on the activity of the baby in the uterus. You have been able to feel whether the baby is usually very active or usually quiet with short periods of activity. If you keep a record of the periods of quiet and activity during the last month of pregnancy, you will be able to predict the activity level to expect of the baby, as well as when the baby is most likely to be awake or asleep during the first two weeks of life. This is a time when many mothers feel a loss of control over their lives because they are not able to predict their baby's schedule. After the first two weeks, your interactions begin to influence his schedule.

In the first few days after birth you can find out much about your baby's personality and style of interacting with the environment. The following information describes how to try for

particular responses from your baby, and gives some of the meanings of the responses.

## Visual Response

To get the best visual response, do this when your baby is quiet and looking around. Show your face to the baby. Move your face very slowly from side to side and up and down. Does your baby follow your face with her eyes? Does she turn her head to follow your face? To help your baby focus her attention on you, try these one at a time: unwrap her arms, hold her upright in front of you, rock her up and down or side to side. Babies can maintain their attention for varying lengths of time. You can help her maintain her attention longer by gently helping her hold her arms and legs still, using a combination of talking and facial expressions, and imitating and enlarging on her expressions.

## Auditory Response

Lay your baby on a flat surface where you can talk close to his ear. Talk to him continuously in the soft, high-pitched voice that babies like. Does he become quiet to listen? Do his eyes brighten? Does he search with his eyes for the sound? Does he turn his head toward you? Now turn him to try this on his other side. Babies will often stop crying to listen to a voice, showing us how important hearing is to them.

## Habituation

Habituation is the ability to lessen response to

# Parenting **PERSPECTIVES**



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repeated stimuli. When your baby is sleeping, shake a rattle about 12 inches from her ear. She will probably startle. After all of her movement has stopped, shake the rattle again. Her response will likely be less this time. Continue to do this for 10 times, until she responds only with eye blinks or does not respond at all. If your baby continues to respond, is not able to shut out the stimuli, she may have difficulty sleeping in a noisy, active place. This is also evidence of extra sensitivity to stimuli.

## **Cuddliness**

Whether or not your baby is cuddly is likely to affect your feelings toward your baby and toward yourself as a parent. However, babies range from very passive, to snugglers, to stiffening, pushing away or thrashing around when they are held close. When your baby is awake, try cuddling

him in each of the following positions. Some babies prefer certain positions.

1. Hold your baby against your chest; placing his head where he can hear your heartbeat may help.
2. Hold your baby up on your shoulder so he can snuggle into your neck.
3. Cradle your baby in your arms. If his head is just below your left breast he can probably hear your heart.

If your baby does not like to be cuddled, accept this as part of his temperament instead of frustrating him and yourself by trying to force cuddling. You can enjoy each other in many ways. Try other forms of handling him and playing with him to see what he likes.

## **Consolability**

All parents want to be able to soothe their baby, but babies vary in their ability to console themselves and to be

consoled by caregivers. When your baby starts to be fussy or is crying, watch to see if she puts her hand to her mouth, sucks on her fingers, fist or tongue, pays attention to faces or voices, or moves her arms or legs to a different position. There are ways in which she can console herself. Allow her time to do this instead of interacting with her or picking her up right away. However, only wait 15 seconds after she begins to cry. If she cannot soothe herself in 15 seconds, she needs your help. There will be times when she can console herself and times when she will be too disturbed or too tired to do this by herself.

You can use the following techniques to soothe your baby. Try them first one at a time to find out what your baby likes. Sometimes a combination of the techniques will be needed.

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Give her time to respond to each technique before you move to another one. Keep your movements slow and repetitious.

- Show your baby your face.
- Talk to your baby in a steady, soft voice or hum, sing or croon.
- Place your hand on your baby's abdomen.
- Gently hold your baby's arms with her palms against her abdomen.
- Wrap her snugly (not tightly) in a blanket; try this both with her arms to her abdomen and also with her arms free so she can suck on her hands.
- Pick her up and hold her close to you in the position she likes best.
- Give her a pacifier.
- Rock or walk with her.
- Stroke one area of her body, such as her head, foot or back.

## Irritability

Irritable infants respond to stimuli with fussing and crying. When your baby is drowsy or awake, do the following and note when she becomes upset: uncover her undress her, diaper her, change her position, bathe her. Does she cry or fuss when she is hungry?

## Motor Behavior and Activity

Observe your baby when she is alone. Are her arms and legs fairly quiet, or does she move them a lot? When you are handling her, does she become very active?

## Readability

While you have been finding out about your baby's responses to your actions, you will have seen whether his responses are usually predictable or not. Can you expect that he will respond to certain stimuli in the same way most of the time?

Through doing the above activities, you have probably learned whether your baby has the ability at this time to interact with you for a short period of time and to take in and shut out the environment, or whether she is very sensitive to the environment and responds to everything with activity and crying or by becoming very still (withdrawing).

Does she usually cry or turn away when you combine the stimuli of showing your face, talking to her and touching her? If your baby is very sensitive to stimuli, you can learn the signs (called disengagement cues) that she gives when she is beginning to be overwhelmed. Then you can take measures to reduce the stimuli and/or help her to control herself and to stay

engaged with the environment.

If you find that your baby does not respond to you readily, is unpredictable, you will want to look for more information and special help in how to interact with your baby. Babies like this can be unrewarding to parents. They can cause you to think you are not doing a good job of parenting.

To learn more, look for a parenting class that includes infant behaviors, infant cues, state modulation and parent-child interaction patterns. If you are pregnant, plan to ask the nurses in the hospital to demonstrate your baby's capabilities and behaviors. If you have an infant, ask your health care provider to demonstrate these.

When you have information about your baby and dealing with your baby's behaviors, you can adapt your parenting so that your interactions with your baby will be enjoyable to him and to you. ▣

*This material is principally derived from publications by NCAST (University of Washington) and T.B. Brazelton.*

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