

KNOWING YOUR BABY'S STYLE

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Every baby is unique. However obvious, this fact is often overlooked by parents. Many mothers and fathers are surprised to see how different in temperament a second or third baby is from their first child. There are several attributes that are incorporated into the concept of temperament, which is just the way a baby deals with her world: how she sleeps, how difficult she is to soothe, how she tries to comfort herself. These tendencies can be seen from Day One and become more and more predictable as the baby gets older. They set up expectations for how a child will cope with new events and stress, and they give her parents a frame in which they will work to understand her.

Temperament is an important concept for parents, for they can judge a child's reactions within this expectancy. They know when she is her "usual self" and when she's not. When she's not, they can evaluate her for illness or a reaction to stress, and they can begin to recognize transitions just before a spurt in her development. When she deviates from her usual self, a parent must decide which of these events is taking place. If it's a spurt in development, they may want to understand that spurt before making decisions.

The nine elements we watch for in assessing temperament were pointed out by Psychiatrists Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas in the book "*Know Your Child*" (Basic Books, 1987). In brief, they are:

ACTIVITY LEVEL: Is she usually laid back and calm or always on the go?

DISTRACTIBILITY: Does she need quiet to focus, or can she tune out noise and other distractions?

PERSISTENCE: Does she stick with tasks or give up easily?

APPROACH/WITHDRAWAL: How does she handle new and stressful situations?

INTENSITY: Is she generally hotheaded or a cool customer?

ADAPTABILITY: How does she deal with transitions?

REGULARITY: How predictable is she in sleep and personal habits?

SENSORY THRESHOLD: How sensitive is she to noises and sights around her?

MOOD: Is she basically positive or negative in her reactions?

With these as a base, a small child can be characterized, as can the challenge she poses for herself and for those around her. Here are some ways I help parents learn about their baby's style, or temperament.

THE NEWBORN

As I examine a newborn, I sometimes shake a rattle, ring a bell or show him a red ball. Then I watch for his reactions, which I share with his parents.

There are wide differences in the style in which a baby handles responses to stimuli around him, in his need for sleep and his crying. Babies differ in how they can be soothed, as well as in their responses to hunger and discomfort, to temperature changes, to interaction with caregivers. The task for parents is not to compare these characteristics with some other baby's, but to watch and listen for their own baby's particular style.

THE SIX-MONTH-OLD

At this age, a baby's characteristic ways of reacting to handling will be more apparent. I try to enlist the parents in watching the baby's activity with me: the way she responds to touch, to sounds, to being undressed and so on. By six months, at least, quiet babies can be distinguished from more intense, driving ones. Each of these kinds of babies demands a particular adjustment from parents.

As the parents adapt themselves to their particular baby, my observations about her sensitivity to stimuli and her ways of soothing herself can be helpful to them. If I watch carefully and speak about the baby's language, which is her behavior, the parents will more readily share their questions about her and about themselves as parents.

For example, a hypersensitive baby poses a tough challenge to any parent and can arouse doubts about their ability to nurture. A baby who responds to playful attempts to elicit a smile with frantic activity and crying can be terribly frustrating.

When parents try to play with a hypersensitive baby, she may arch away, avert her face or spit up. She is saying, "I'm overloaded." With such a baby, parents must learn subtle techniques of containing, swaddling and gently playing in a quiet, nondistracting atmosphere.

While discussing ways to connect with a hypersensitive baby, I also try to explain to the parents that their concern and eagerness to nurture can be the very qualities that overload such a baby. If they can recognize her fragility and respect it, a new rapport can gradually build between them.

In short, when parents can learn to understand and respect their baby's temperament, life will be much easier for both them and their child.