Temperament in the Classroom

What is temperament?
Temperament describes individual styles of the “how” of behavior. These individual differences in temperament are biologically based, apparent early in life, and, as research has shown, consistent within individuals over time and across different situations.

Dimensions of temperament
Psychiatrists Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess (1977) identified nine dimensions of temperament, eight of which are directly relevant to the interactions between students and teachers and contribute to students’ adjustment in school. These eight dimensions are:

1) **Sensory threshold**: Intensity level of stimulation necessary to evoke a response
2) **Activity level**: Level, tempo, and frequency of motor behavior
3) **Intensity of reaction**: Energy level of response, whether reaction is positive or negative
4) **Adaptability**: Ease with which child responds to new stimuli or changes in situation
5) **Quality of mood**: Balance of pleasant, joyful behavior to unpleasant, crying behavior
6) **Approach/withdrawal**: Nature of initial response to new stimuli, such as people, food, toys
7) **Persistence/attention span**: Continuation and length of time of an activity in spite of obstacles
8) **Distractibility**: Effectiveness of external stimuli in altering the direction of ongoing behavior

Based on children’s individual styles on these temperament dimensions, Thomas and Chess identified three temperament constellations:

- **Easy**: Adaptable, positive in mood, interested in new experience
- **Slow-to-warm-up**: Withdrawn and negative when faced with new situations/people, initially slow to adapt to change but adapt well if given time
- **Difficult**: Intense, low in adaptability, negative in mood, negative in response to newness
How temperament affects a child’s school experience

Achievement in school is related to ability, motivation, experiences, and quality of instruction, as well as temperament. Research suggests that the most important factor affecting a child’s academic success is task orientation, which is related to the temperament dimensions of activity level (low), distractibility (low), and persistence (high). Research has shown that teachers value certain student characteristics such as adaptability, persistence, approach, and positive mood (Keogh, 2003), or students with “easy” temperamental characteristics. However, it is important to remember that there is no “good” or “bad” temperament, rather, it is the way the child’s temperament fits with the environment, or the “goodness of fit” that determines positive or negative outcomes.

Suggestions for working with students with different temperaments

Desrochers & Houck provide several suggestions for working with students with different temperament constellations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working with a student with a difficult temperament</th>
<th>Working with a student with a slow-to-warm-up temperament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teach alternative behaviors: patience, using words to deal with anger and frustration, temper control</td>
<td>Avoid criticism, impatience, and pressure for sociability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modulate the student’s level of stimulation, especially when faced with new students, crowds, events, or situations</td>
<td>Prepare the student for new situations and facilitate the student’s expression of needs so that they are not ignored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions are best tolerated when managed slowly</td>
<td>Allow time for the student to observe others and engage with them at his or her own pace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with a high activity level need physical outlets on the playground or through athletic or other physical activities</td>
<td>Provide opportunities for the student to have responsibility for a younger student and to experience social leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Awareness of individual differences in children’s temperaments is important for teachers in managing a classroom. Recognizing that behavior reflects individual differences in temperament, rather than motivation, helps reframe the behavior and allow for necessary adjustments of the fit between the child and the situation. Teacher awareness is key to successfully establishing an optimal fit between a child’s individual temperament and his or her classroom environment.

Dr. Lisa Piejak, School Psychologist for Early Childhood Programs/Services, Troy Center for Transition

Recommended Resources on Temperament: