

Observation Guidelines: Noticing Temperament in Infants and Toddlers

ACTIVITY LEVEL

Look for:

High activity level

- Squirms a lot
- As infant, wiggles while getting diaper changed
- As toddler, loves to run, climb, jump, and explore

Low activity level

- Sits in high chair contentedly and watches the world go by
- Sits quietly on own and plays with toys



For infants and toddlers with a high activity level, provide many opportunities for safe exploration of the environment. Create challenges in the environment, such as a safe obstacle course with a favorite toy at the end. Encourage children to dance to music. Incorporate movement into quiet activities; for example, while reading a book, encourage children to flip and touch the pages. For children with low activity level, slow down to their pace and then invite more active play.

SENSITIVITY

Look for:

High Sensitivity

- Withdraws from bright lights
- Cries when music is loud

Low Sensitivity

- Doesn't mind new stimulation
- Doesn't pay much attention until stimulation is extreme

For highly sensitive children, keep the environment calm—dim the lights, play music quietly, and shield them from chaotic social events. For less sensitive children, watch for the kind of stimulation they crave. For example, if they like active social games, engage them in peekaboo or roll a ball on the floor and give them a turn.

EMOTIONAL INTENSITY

Look For:

High emotional intensity

- Is fearful and cautious with new people and experiences
- Shows dramatic displays of anger, sadness



Low emotional intensity

- Is quiet and does not fuss much
- Shows more interest when emotional exchanges are fairly intense

For children who are emotionally intense, empathize with their strong feelings, and suggest appropriate ways to express them: “I can see you’re angry. Remember, don’t bite. Say ‘No!’ instead.” Help children who are less emotionally intense to articulate their feelings: “You look sad; can you tell me how you’re feeling?”

SOCIALITY

Look For:

High sociability

- Smiles at new people
- Enjoys playing in large groups
- Is somewhat independent of caregivers



Low sociability

- Doesn't interact with new people unless it is clear they are friendly and in other ways safe
- Prefers to play with one other child
- Stays close to familiar adult in new social situation

For children who show high sociability, encourage this disposition. Also encourage them to sit and do quiet activities on their own. For children who show low sociability, let them warm up to new people slowly. For example, hold a child in your arms when meeting a new person; sit near the child when he or she ventures to play with an unfamiliar peer; and offer reassurance in new settings: "Let's go visit the preschool room and see what they do in there—they have an awesome slide."

ADAPTABILITY

Look For:

Ease with change

- Has an easy time with transitions, such as moving inside after outdoor play
- Notices changes in environment, such as new furniture, with interest but no concern

Difficulty with change

- Resists new objects and experiences, such as new cups with a different kind of lid
- Acts out during transitions between activities
- Is suspicious of new people

When children show ease with change, continue to make their world challenging, but also predictable. With children who have difficulty with change, establish routines so that children know what to expect from day to day, advise them when there is a departure from a regular routine ("Our nap time will be a little late today because we have a special visitor"), give them warning about a change ("When I turn off the light, it will be time to pick up toys"), and give choices when possible ("Would you prefer to build blocks or go to dramatic play?").

PERSISTENCE

Look For:

High persistence

- Can wait patiently while drink or bottle is being prepared
- Shows tolerance for frustration

Low persistence

- Wants comfort immediately
- Gets frustrated easily



For highly persistent children, explain what you are doing to meet their needs: "I'm slicing up these apples for a healthy snack" and comment on their progress toward goals: "You are working hard on that puzzle!" For children who show little persistence, offer comfort when they are frustrated: "Can I sit with you while you do that?" Help them to consider other ways to reach their desired goal: "What if you turned the puzzle piece around like this?" Encourage them to break up difficult tasks into smaller, more manageable parts.