

Temperament

A child's 'temperament' can change over time.

A child's emerging dispositions such as their activity level, emotional expression, attention and self-regulation are the result of complex interactions between genes, biology and environmental factors. It is important for caregivers to understand their child's natural strengths and adopt caregiving strategies that build on those strengths so they can thrive in different environments.



Take it Further...

Learn about it... A child's temperament is not fixed (p.15 EYM Common Message Paper)

Temperament traits are early, developing 'dispositions' in the areas of activity, affectivity, attention and self-regulation.

These 'dispositions' are a result of genetic, biological and environmental factors, inclusive of the [environment of relationships](#) and culture, working together throughout a child's development.

For example, temperament is influenced by both affective (e.g. emotional responses) and cognitive (e.g. attention and inhibitory control) processing 'systems' which are highly integrated and dependent upon one another.

By the preschool years as these two 'systems' develop and 'stabilize' they change the expression of more reactive temperament traits e.g. as children develop more complex executive function skills they are better able to modify their activity level, manage emotions and stay on task.

Revisiting the concept of 'goodness of fit':

Previously experts in the field recommended that caregivers adjust 'caregiving practises' to better support their child's unique way of responding to the world. This approach was referred to as 'goodness of fit'.

However, today's research suggests that we would better serve children by helping them accommodate and adjust to different 'environments' by scaffolding them (providing guidance and support) rather than changing the 'environment' itself.

Research has shown that there is a strong connection between temperament and a wide variety of critical life outcomes; relationships, academic achievement, health, and psychopathology.

Self-regulation and executive function can influence the expression of a child's temperament.

Take a deeper dive. Watch the following video: [What Problems Can Child Temperament Cause?](#)

Familiarize yourself with the many resources found online at the [Canadian Self-regulation Initiative](#) & [The Centre on the Developing Child Harvard University](#) that support building children's capacity for self-regulation.

Talk about it... Tell caregivers and colleagues about temperament

It is important to understand:

That there are no good or bad temperaments.

An adult's temperament can affect their interactions with their child. For example, for an outgoing caregiver it may be difficult to have a child who is shy.

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Helping children develop self-regulation and executive function skills can greatly influence the expression of temperament traits at either end of the continuum (e.g. extremely sensitive, extremely reactive).

Children need caregivers to:

- Be aware of differences in temperament.
- Avoid labelling a child's temperament (e.g. 'She is so shy') as over time, what was a 'tendency' can in fact become how a child defines themselves.
- 'Scaffold' (e.g. guide and support) their child to help them to successfully manage situations that are experienced as stressful.

Try it... Moving from knowledge to practise

Encourage caregivers to:

Complete an online [interactive temperament tool](#)! This tool can help:

- Find solutions to everyday caregiving challenges.
- Develop insight into their [caregiving style](#).
- Raise awareness of their child's thoughts and feelings that might be impacting their behaviour.

Create opportunities for children to develop self-regulation and executive function skills.

'Scaffold' a shy or anxious child through a potentially stressful, new experience. For example:

- Prepare their child ahead of time by telling them what they can expect.
- Stay close to their child as they introduce them to the new experience.

- Talk with their child about what they see/hear in a reassuring manner.
- Model positive interactions with other people by introducing themselves and their child to others.
- Engage their child in an activity they enjoy.
- Invite other children to play along with them as their child becomes more comfortable in the new setting.
- Praise their child for making a new friend and conquering their fears!

Video: Dan Siegel on how to nurture and "scaffold" a shy child:

[Dan Siegel - Use Mind Sight to Nurture a Shy Child](#)

For more detailed information go to [Social-Emotional Development in the Early Years: A Common Message Paper \(2nd, Ed.\)](#), published by the Halton Early Years Mental Health Committee (EYMHC) to provide professionals with common messages on early social-emotional development.

EYMH Committee members:

Halton Region Health Department
Halton Region Social and Community Services
Reach Out Centre for Kids (ROCK)
Halton Children's Aid Society

ErinoakKids Centre for Treatment and Development
EarlyON Child and Family Centres
Community Living Burlington

Our Kids Network (OKN) and EYMHC work in partnership to manage the [Early Years Mental Health Toolkit](#) on the OKN website.