

Children's traits don't change, but parenting can adjust

My two children are complete opposites. One is easy-going and pleasant, and the other actually drives me crazy. Why does this happen? Is there anything I can do?

It sounds like what you're talking about is not really behavior, but temperament. And yes, there are things you can do: You can adjust your parenting style according to each child's personality. Treating your children differently doesn't mean you love them unequally — it means that you recognize that they are individuals and each deserve care and attention that best fits their unique characteristics.

One thing to remember: The very thing that might drive you batty today is usually what makes a child successful later in life. The class clown might grow up to be a famous comedian. The kid who negotiates every single thing could become a successful attorney. Even if you have an out-of-control, difficult, strong-willed child, try to look beyond behavioral problems to the underlying qualities that could prove to be beneficial as an adult.

Many books and Web sites, including the Child Development Institute (<http://www.childdevelopmentinfo.com>), have information on the topic. Basically, researchers have identified nine traits to assess temperament:

- **Activity level.** Some children are always on the go; others have a preference for stillness.
- **Distractibility.** Children who are easily distracted sometimes have trouble finishing a task, but it's also easy to divert them when



they begin doing something undesirable.

- **Intensity.** Some children react strongly, either positively or negatively, to both major and minor events. Others tend to be more calm, no matter what.
- **Regularity.** In terms of when they prefer to eat and sleep, some children are like clockwork, while others are totally unpredictable.
- **Sensory threshold.** This relates to how sensitive your child is to sounds, tastes, touch, temperature — all sorts of physical stimuli.
- **Approach/withdrawal.** Children react differently to new people and new situations.
- **Adaptability.** Some children are comfortable transitioning to and from activities; some are more hesitant.
- **Persistence.** Some children continue activities even when they encounter roadblocks; others tend to stop or ask for assistance.
- **Mood.** Children can have a generally positive outlook on life, or they may tend to be more serious about situations.

All of these characteristics have pros and cons. None are “good” or “bad” in all situations. But it's important to understand your child's inborn temperamental qualities — as well as your own. The thing about temperament is that it doesn't change — what can change is how people — both children and adults — can learn to direct their natural energies and instincts in a positive way.

Family Fundamentals is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Family Fundamentals, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu.



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By Martha Filipic
(614) 292-9833
filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu

Dear Subscriber: This column was reviewed by Terri Worthington, family and consumer sciences educator for Ohio State University Extension in Geauga County.

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**Section of Communications
and Technology
News and Media Relations**
2021 Coffey Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1044
(614) 292-2011

208 Research Services
Building
1680 Madison Ave.
Wooster, OH 44691-4096
(330) 263-3780

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