Discussing Temperament
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Theoretical Foundations
- Infant/very young child development & behavior
- Infant/very young child & family-centered practice
- Family relationships & dynamics
Direct Service Skills
- Observation & listening
- Developmental guidance

“Mother love in infancy and childhood is as important for mental health as are vitamins and proteins for physical health.” John Bowlby, best known for his development of attachment theory. While not all caregivers of an infant are the mother, the love that is described here is the foundation for infant mental health. Many home visiting staff attended the recent Foundations to Infant Mental Health (IMH) Training by Peggy MacLean, Ph.D., IMH-III & Karen Longenecker, LCSW, IMH-III. Most of us are familiar with the six principles of Infant Mental Health, as articulated by Dr. Alicia Lieberman in the Attachment Vitamins MOODLE, and this training helped home visitors understand what IMH means to our work with families and understanding the importance of early relationships.

Home Visiting is relationship-based work, with the focus on the parent/child relationship and family relationships. One of the areas discussed in the training was a child’s temperament. Temperament is frequently not discussed with parents, but can be a very effective way in describing to a parent why their toddler’s actions may not be in line with their expectations. Temperament can influence the ebb and flow of secure base behavior. A slow to warm child may stay by a caregiver’s side more, while an active child may leave caregiver’s side more readily. Helping parents understand that when their child does not have the same temperament they do this may cause conflict or a “mismatch”. Compatibility between caregiver and child does not mean sameness or the absence of conflict, it means the caregiver’s expectations and demands from their child can be met by the child’s motivations, capacities, and behavioral style. They can develop the skills to support their child’s social emotional development.

Thomas and Chess (1970) study classified the following temperament types:
Easy babies: 40% of infants; adjust easily to new situations, quickly establish routines, are generally cheerful and easy to calm.

In general, easy children respond favorably to various child-rearing styles. Under certain conditions, however, their ready adaptability to parental guidance itself lead to the development of a behavioral problem. Having adapted readily to the parents' standards and expectations early in life, the child on moving into the world of his peers and school may find that the demands of these environments conflict sharply with the behavior patterns he has learned at home. If the conflict between the two sets of demands is severe, the child may be unable to make an adaptation that reconciles the double standard.

Difficult babies: 10% of infants; slow to adjust to new experiences, likely to react negatively and intensely to stimuli and events.

In the case of difficult children, the guidance problem is present from the onset. The parents must cope with the child's irregularity and the slowness with which he adapts in order to establish conformity to the family's rules of living. If the parents are inconsistent, impatient or punitive in their guidance of the child, he is much more likely to react negatively than other children are. Only by exceptionally objective, consistent treatment, taking full account of the child's temperament can he be brought to get along easily with others and to learn appropriate behavior. This may take a long time, but with skillful guidance, such children do learn the rules and function well. The essential requirement is that the parents recognize the need for unusually painstaking guidance; tactics that work well with other children may fail for the difficult child.

Slow-to-warm-up babies: 15% of infants; somewhat difficult at first but become easier over time.

For children in the "slow to warm up" category the key to successful development is allowing the child to adapt to the environment at his own pace. If the teacher or parents of such a child pressure him to move quickly into new situations, the insistence is likely to intensify his natural tendency to withdraw. On the other hand, he does need encouragement and opportunity to try new experiences.

Since temperament focuses on the “why” of behavior instead of the “what”, the concept of temperament is useful and important to our work with families because we can use temperament to help caregivers understand their child’s challenging or puzzling behavior and change the way they interact with their child.
Questions to encourage discussion and reflection...

- How can you use temperament as one factor to explain a young child’s behavior to their parent?
- How do you think a parent will receive this information?
- How can you use temperament to understand and support your relationship with families?

Parents can modulate children's temperament by their influences on the environment.

- What is good parenting for a difficult baby/child?
- What is good parenting for a slow-to-warm-up or inhibited baby/child?

References/Additional Resources

- Self-paced professional development: Attachment Vitamins MOODLE
  [https://hscmoodle.health.unm.edu/course/index.php?categoryid=64](https://hscmoodle.health.unm.edu/course/index.php?categoryid=64)
- Center on the Social Emotional Foundation of Early Learning (CSEFEL)
  [http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/)
- Zero to Three
  [https://www.zerotothree.org/](https://www.zerotothree.org/)
- New Mexico Association for Infant Mental Health (NMAIMH)
- Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (TACSEI)
  [http://challengingbehavior.cbc.s.usf.edu/](http://challengingbehavior.cbc.s.usf.edu/)