

The easy child

BY KATARZYNA WIECZOREK-GHISSO

How do educators maintain enough focus on obliging and quiet children?

A group of inquisitive children are embarking on adventure in the preschool room. Equipped with varied resources, they eagerly engage in play, negotiating their decisions and planning their discoveries. Jeremy observes the frolics from a distance, but remains removed. As they conquer their self-created challenges, he occasionally catches their gaze. Unaffected, he resumes stacking Duplo blocks while humming a tune to himself in the same space where he began play that morning; unfortunately, no-one has really noticed. Time quickly passes and before long, morning play comes to an end and children are hurried to morning tea. Jeremy is last in the rush, obligingly concluding his play and following the other children to the bathroom. This depiction is characteristic of an average morning for Jeremy, who generally keeps to himself.

Jeremy is like many children. He is what you would call an 'easy' child. He follows instructions, is undisruptive and he participates in tasks when asked. Jeremy is what experts would refer to as 'introverted'; his behaviour displaying a particular characteristic or temperament. Research in the area of social and emotional development has recently taken centre stage, and is said to significantly influence how we've come to understand the social functioning of young children.

Assumed as having both biological and genetic influences, temperament is a general term concerned with the 'how' of behaviour. Not said to impact one's ability, temperament relates to motivation, which influences 'why' a person behaves in the way they do. According to Thomas and Chess, temperament is present at birth, and influences how we respond emotionally to people and objects around us. Clinical trials undertaken in 1977 exploring the temperament of children identified nine psychological responses thought to be present at birth, which would strengthen our knowledge about what influences a person's temperament and, consequently, their behaviour. The work of Thomas and Chess is significant for educators as our improved understanding will better support our interactions with the likes of 'easy' children. Temperament characteristics include:

- Activity level, which refers to the nature of children's active involvement in play.
- Rhythmicity and regularity, which refers to how unpredictable children are in their daily care routines (sleeping, eating, toileting).
- Approach/withdrawal, which refers to how children react/respond to new situations.
- Adaptability, which refers to the way in which children adjust to unfamiliar circumstances or persist when faced with difficulty.
- Responsiveness, which refers to the amount of stimulation children require to elicit a response, such as humour, fear, surprise, et cetera.

- Reaction intensity, which refers to energy levels displayed by children when reacting to stimuli.
- Mood quality, which refers to how content children are in their environment.
- Distractibility, which refers to children maintaining focus without being diverted from a task.
- Persistence and attention span, which refers to the length of time children maintain attention/interest despite interruptions when undertaking a task.

Thomas and Chess grouped the above nine temperaments into three classifications – easy children, difficult children and slow-to-warm-up children – to help educators identify better ways to support their learning. Easy children are those exhibiting predictable behaviours, difficult children display varying moods and can be irregular in their care needs, and slow-to-warm-up children can display difficulty adapting and can be withdrawn in new situations. As said previously, Jeremy falls into the ‘easy’ child category. He is predictable in most care routines, ‘goes with the flow’, and, as a result, tends to be overlooked by educators. In contrast to extroverts, the introverted child like Jeremy draws energy from within and therefore needs opportunities to connect with their own feelings in order to maintain equilibrium. The extrovert, however, is energised by chaos, and overt stimulation, and consequently draws more attention.

While researchers link temperament to genetic predisposition, environmental factors have been highlighted as contributing, and thus considered equally important. This has significant implications for educators and the manner in which their environment helps children reach their full potential. This notion is inextricably linked to the question of quality, sparking more interest in early childhood than ever before. Coupled with what we now know about early brain development, there is indisputable evidence that higher-quality responsive environments have social and behavioural benefits, which have fuelled the long overdue nationalisation of quality standards in Australia.

Thomas and Chess would consider responsive environments as those that are compatible to children’s temperamental characteristics, or what they referred to as ‘goodness of fit’. Taken literally, this model would effectively accommodate the ‘easy’ child’s temperament, and complement their personality and interests. In the absence of consideration of exhibited characteristics, introverted children would simply fall through the cracks. Thankfully, the concept of a responsive environment is now a key

feature in the National Quality Standard and is specifically embedded in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). The challenge for us is grappling with terminology, and coming to understand how to represent this work at a practical level evidenced in our documentation.

The key is strengthening our conceptual understanding of the EYLF and identifying how the ‘easy’ child fits into the scheme of things. Equipped with the strategies listed below, educators can engage in practices that validate children’s different personalities, which will go a long way to validating varying temperamental styles.

- Identifying temperaments: taking the time to document the nature of children’s regular interactions will highlight how well the current environment caters for their varying temperaments.
- Environmental considerations: play spaces should be open-ended and arranged to complement varying temperaments, especially those more conducive to choice and those offering privacy and solitude.



News bites

- Predictable and flexible routines: responsive routines consider the varying engagement levels of children and cater for their styles. Facilitating staggered meal and rest times is one suggestion where the 'easy' child can be better accommodated.
- Reflecting on own temperament: thoughtful educators consider the impact of their own personalities and adapt responses to accommodate for varying temperaments in children. Seeking feedback from other educators, while confronting, would offer further insight into their own characteristics, which may hinder the development of close relationships.
- Choosing appropriate guidance techniques: guidance techniques do not always take into account varied temperaments, as we typically adopt the same approaches for common behaviours. Adopting guidance strategies in accordance with the previously listed temperament styles would yield more positive results and strengthen relationships.
- Collaborating with families: by far the most important strategy is developing reciprocal relationships with families, as this will ensure a deeper understanding of individual temperaments, and support better transitions between home and care environments.

The nurturing of a child's temperament has the potential to positively contribute to their lifelong social functioning. For 'easy' children, this is particularly important as they rely on a responsive environment to complement their individual characteristics. As clearly represented in Quality Areas 5 and 6 of the National Quality Standard, educators in Australia are now legally responsible for ensuring that they know their children and their families well. Educators, equipped with a solid understanding of their children, will be able to make informed decisions about the day-to-day learning opportunities that best support each child's learning dispositions. This, in turn, would make for compatibility between current and prior experiences, and positively impact future development and learning. The above strategies are a good way forward in achieving this result. **B**

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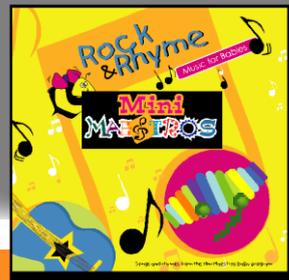
Musical incursion group Mini Maestros has released two music albums for babies and toddlers.

The songs have been created with young children in mind, combining common nursery rhymes with other interactive songs.

'Rock & Rhyme – Music for Babies' has 41 tracks designed to introduce babies to a variety of musical tempos, styles and instruments.

'Jiggle and Giggle – Music for Small Toddlers' promotes language and gross motor skill development through 36 tracks of rhymes and so

www.minimaestros.com.au



Curriculum Kids

Following the thesis of Liana Caplan, an early childhood teacher, that looked at the difficulties for room leaders to implement the Victorian Early Years Learning Framework into their programming, a new business idea was born. Ms Caplan teamed up with colleague Samantha Dornau to establish Curriculum Kids. The company publishes guides to help educators put the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) into practice. With Ms Dornau's background in psychology and childcare, the result is a set of programming ideas that aids in children's emotional, intellectual and physical development. All programming activities are linked to the EYLF to aid educators in understanding and documenting their children's tasks.

You can see the range of books and CDs available at: www.curriculumkids.com.au.

Early Years Quality Fund

The Federal Government announced an independent review of the EYQF on 28 September 2013, which will consider the establishment process and implementation of the EYQF.

The review may result in the Government deciding to distribute EYQF funds in a different way.

In all cases, organisations should do nothing to commit to wage increases in the expectation that EYQF funding will be made available for wage increases.

The review was expected to be completed by the end of October 2013, but is still in progress.

No further applications under the current program guidelines will be accepted, and no further assessments will be undertaken.

www.education.gov.au/news/early-years-quality-fund