

Temperament & Social Development

ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators™

Individual Differences in Sensitivity to Social Stimulation

Young children, especially mobile infants and young toddlers, tend to exhibit and experience increased emotional shifts and intensity directly related to their growing sense of self that affect their interactions with others. While these individual fluctuations are related to their progressing social-emotional development, other individual differences such as temperament can be viewed as “hard-wired.”

Temperament reflects differences in the way our brains process incoming sensory signals. Some dimensions of temperament can strongly affect interactions and relationships with others.



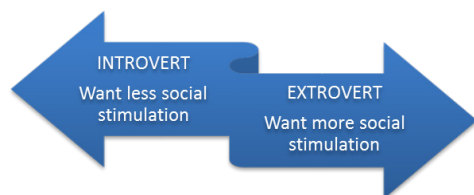
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People whose brains are especially sensitive to stimulation tend to be quieter, less energetic and active, and more cautious in new situations. In other words, they try to reduce the amount of stimulation to a manageable level. People whose brains are much less sensitive tend to be high-energy, high-risk people who crave a lot of stimulation.



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When it comes to our social tendencies, we often call stimulus-avoiding people *shy* or *introverted* and stimulus-craving people *outgoing* or *extroverted*. But to be clear, sensitivity to social stimulation is better understood as a continuum.



Children (and adults, too) can fall anywhere along the line. Introverted children enjoy interactions with other children and adults, but those interactions take a lot of energy, so they need more breaks from social stimulation to “recharge.”

Although our American society tends to look more favorably on outgoing personalities, educators need to remember that the basis of these temperamental differences is in the brain and isn't a choice that can be easily changed. Unless a child's shyness is so extreme that it keeps her from participating in any activities, it should simply be appreciated and accommodated, as we do with other characteristics that make up each unique child. Allowing space and time for young introverts to pull back from others and recharge their energy can be difficult in a group setting, but it certainly is not impossible.

For an eye-opening and inspiring talk on this topic, watch the following presentation by Susan Cain (TED, 2012): https://www.ted.com/talks/susan_cain_the_power_of_introverts. For additional information, you can also read her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (Cain, 2013).