Introduction

We have intuitive feelings about certain infants:

• “That is an easy baby.”
• “This is an irritable baby.”

Each infant has his or her unique style of interacting with parents and other caregivers. The differences in style between infants affect the responses of caregivers.

Each infant is unique from the moment of birth and even before!

Part of the infant’s uniqueness is due to temperament (see the reading “Infant Temperament”). Temperament refers to the basic biological dimensions of personality that are apparent early and continue to be demonstrated to some degree throughout life (Bates, 1989; Medoff-Cooper, 1993). It can be thought of as the infant’s style of behavior, how an infant responds behaviorally rather than the what of the behavior (Medoff-Cooper, 1993). An infant’s temperament therefore influences the infant’s behavior.

Other aspects of infant behavior that relate to temperament and are helpful in understanding interaction style are self-regulation, readability, and predictability. The more an infant is able to self-regulate (adapt to his or her surroundings in a positive and predictable way) and to behave in ways that the caregiver can understand (readable) and anticipate (predictable), the easier it is to care for the infant.

When parents are knowledgeable about temperament, they are better able to understand their infant’s behaviors, to match their expectations and parenting style to their infant’s behavior, and to assist in the relationship-building process between parents and infants. Awareness and understanding of temperament helps parents and staff respond to an infant on the basis of the infant’s individual personality and style of interacting. Understanding infant behavior is critical, for it forms the basis for early interactions between the infant and caregivers and the development of attachment between parents and infant.

Infants interact with their caregivers through specific behaviors in response to internal (hunger, pain, fatigue) and external (handling, temperature, caregiver’s voice) stimuli. These specific behaviors are called cues. Cues are behaviors that signal an infant’s status or needs. Infants differ in the clarity with which they make known their needs (readability). Caregivers must interpret infant cues within the context of what is going on to determine their meaning. For example, a yawn in an infant who is being held, talked to, and otherwise stimulated may be a cue that the infant is ready for a break. An infant may also yawn due to sleepiness or upon awakening. Infants also differ in the consistency of their sleeping, waking, and eating cycles (predictability). Some respond predictably in all areas; others, only in some areas; still others are often unpredictable. Regardless of how predictable infants are, most parents need help in learning to understand their infant’s cues.
Infants interact with their caregivers through a variety of activities:

- **Infant state**: A group of characteristic behaviors and physiologic changes that recur together in a regular pattern
- **Behaviors**: Observable activities in the infant in response to external or internal stimuli in the environment
- **Engagement cues**: Types of behavior that signal the infant’s readiness to interact with caregivers
- **Disengagement cues**: Types of behavior that signal the infant’s need for time-out or a reduction in stimuli

An understanding of and sensitivity to state and to an infant’s unique temperament and behaviors form the foundation for mutual trust, which encourages attachment as parents and newborns learn that they can rely on each other to respond appropriately and consistently in various situations. Nurses are in a position to help parents learn about their infant’s unique characteristics, while at the same time removing some of the uncertainty about why infants act as they do.

This module includes five major sections:

- Infant temperament
- States of the term newborn
- Infant behavior, reflexes and cues
- Feeding the term infant
- Teaching parents about infant states and behaviors