

Temperament and children:

I find myself frequently talking to parents of problem children about the temperament of their child. Very often parents get very frustrated with themselves, and feel like failures, because of their inability to get their child to behave like their brothers and sisters or other 'normal' children. Most of us as parents employ a few simple strategies for dealing with children and most often this is effective. However, some children have difficult temperaments from a very young age and do not respond well to basic parenting strategies and require extra effort, patience, and tolerance by parents.

A great deal of advice about parenting seems to be based on the assumption that all children should respond to disciplinary measures in the same way – and if they don't then there is something wrong either with the parents or the child. Very often there is nothing wrong with either, the difficulty is a consequence of a child's genetically inherited temperament. So how an individual child reacts to parents' attempts to influence her behaviour depends largely on his or her temperament.

For instance, one of the consistent findings in research on temperament is that children with difficult temperaments are much more likely to show various kinds of emotional disturbance or behaviour problems than children are children with less extreme temperaments. Included in behaviour problems are patterns such as over-aggressiveness, depression, anxiety, and hyperactivity. Many parents find themselves ill-prepared to deal with some of these extremes. Another typical finding is that children who are rated as having aspects of difficult temperament are twice as likely to later show one or another of these behaviour problems.

Babies with more difficult temperaments are more likely to become pre-schoolers who show some problems, and preschoolers whose temperament is rated as difficult or who lack self-control are more likely to have behaviour problems at age 10 or 15 or even as adults. Such children are especially challenging to manage both at home and at school.

Still, despite this, the majority of children who have difficult temperaments in infancy or in preschool years do not develop behaviour problems at a later stage. They are more likely to have problems but the progression is not inevitable.

The key seems to be whether the infant's or child's "difficultness" is acceptable to the parents or can be managed by the family in some effective way. For example, researchers who studies changes and continuities in crying patterns in a small sample of infant children found that babies who cried a lot as newborns but cried much less at 5 months had mothers who were highly responsive to them. Babies who cried a lot at both ages had much less sensitive mothers. The responsive mothers had an influence on their babies temperamental difficulties.

Children with difficult temperaments are less able to deal with major life stresses but when provided with a supportive environment they can move through childhood without any major problems. This may be of little comfort to parents, however. When parents themselves are under severe stress it is very hard to provide this kind of maximally supportive and accepting environment for any child let alone a difficult one.

Parents though have to keep in mind that a child with a difficult temperament is going to need more attention, more help, more support than a temperamentally less volatile

child under any kind of stress, such as when a child changes school or baby-sitters or has to conform with family changes. Sometimes a problem temperament has to be approached like a physical problem such as PMT or diabetes. One has to 'work around it' and not work against it.