

Differences from Birth

Part I

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

As a clinical psychologist I have often been asked questions about the nature-nurture issue, that is, “Are our personalities determined primarily by inborn, biological factors or by environmental factors?” Most people now recognize that both biology and environment are very influential forces in shaping who we are, how we think, and how we behave. However, when we interact with others we sometimes are guided by assumptions that fail to consider how each of these forces has an impact. For example, I can think of many instances in which parents and teachers have said to me that they know children are different from each other at birth, but a few minutes after making this statement they noted, “I treat each of my children (or students) the same. That’s the fairest thing to do.” Yet, if children are different from infancy, then is it fair to have the same expectations for all of them? On the other side of the coin, at least one popular book in the past year has minimized the impact that parents have on their children’s development, placing the dominant influence first on innate factors and later on peers.

One of the main questions I am asked pertaining to nature vs. nurture is the ways in which children are different from birth. The question has been posed so frequently that I have included it as a theme in all of my parenting workshops. There are various inborn qualities that distinguish infants from each other. I have selected one quality to discuss in this and my next column, namely, temperament, since I believe that many stresses in parent-child or teacher-child or even husband-wife relationships are based on expectations that we have for the other person that given her or his unique temperament she or he is not able to meet. In this month’s article I will describe some of the important research about temperament, while I will devote next month’s column to examine the implications of this research in guiding our relationship with others; I will especially focus on the role of parents and teachers in accommodating to the temperament of children.

It may be helpful if I provided a short history of the changes that have occurred in my knowledge and perspective about innate differences in children. When I first entered the field of clinical psychology in the mid-1960’s, I was taught, and as a young psychologist believed, that all infants were the same at birth. This belief unintentionally created within me a rather negative, accusatory view of the role of parents in causing problems in their children. I am embarrassed to admit that in the early stages of my career when I consulted with parents who had a child with emotional or behavioral

problems my initial thought was, “You really screwed up. Since all children are the same at birth and you have a child with problems, you must have done something wrong to cause these problems.” Fortunately, I was wise enough not to utter this sentiment although most likely it was conveyed nonverbally to many of the parents with whom I was doing parenting counseling (“parent blaming” might be a better description of what I was doing). Actually, I was not alone in my accusations towards parents. It was a time when mental health professionals readily blamed parents for almost every emotional problem their child manifested including schizophrenia, autism, depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorders.

Thankfully, this phase of my career that I call “parental blame” was soon to be challenged, first by the birth of my own children and then by research. I remember thinking when my oldest son, Richard, was born, “There’s more to parenting than meets the eye.” When my younger son Douglas came along I thought, “Wow, even two children from the same gene pool can be really different from birth.”

At the same time my children were born, child development researchers and clinicians were beginning to take an increasingly closer look at differences in children in terms of such qualities as temperament, learning styles, and coping styles. Two of the pioneers in the field of examining differences in infant temperament are psychiatrists Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas. They and their colleagues studied many infants and identified nine characteristics of temperament. They strongly advocated that parents understand and appreciate these characteristics so that they could interact with their children in a more effective and satisfactory manner. For example, Chess and Thomas reported that some infants are born more active, others less active, some seem to have a happy mood while others appear more negative, some adjust quickly to new situations while others cry at the smallest modification in routine, some are hypersensitive to touch or sound while others enjoy sensory stimulation, and some quickly develop regular eating and sleeping patterns while others never seem to do so.

Given these variations in the temperamental patterns of children, Chess and Thomas provided labels for three kinds of children: the “easy” child, the “slow-to-warm-up” child, and the “difficult” child. They noted that these are not precise labels since many children do not fit neatly into any of these three groups while other youngsters appear to possess attributes from at least two of the groups. Still others may appear one way in some situations and with some people but another way in other situations. Although further refinements of their labels may not be possible in light of how complex each person is, the work of Chess and Thomas has major implications for how we parent and teach children and even as adults how we relate with each other.

While there is always a danger of pigeonholing children into categories, I believe it is helpful to describe the three kinds of children mentioned by Chess and Thomas and to reflect upon how each requires a different kind of parenting or teaching approach. Also, as I mentioned earlier, if we fail to appreciate these differences we may hold expectations for our children that will be difficult for them to achieve. We should also understand that these temperamental differences are not cast in stone and that life experiences will significantly impact on the kind of person we are. Certainly biology is not destiny.

My description of “easy” children is that from the moment they are born they seem to say to their parents, “Don’t worry, we’re going to help you feel like the best parents in the world.” They are easily satisfied, easy to raise, develop regular sleeping and eating patterns, love to be held, and always seem to smile. Although I am exaggerating to make a point, I often say in my workshops, “You can spend one minute of an hour with easy children and they feel they are getting all of the love in the world.” Easy children are the ones you enjoy bringing to your own parents as if to say, “See, this is how you raise children.”

When they begin school, teachers respond to easy children in the same positive way as parents. As temperamentally easy children develop parents enjoy taking them places, assured that they will behave appropriately. Parents of easy children eagerly anticipate school conferences (and teachers look forward to holding such conferences) since they know that positive comments will pervade the meeting. These parents also look forward to sporting events in which their children are participating because they know that their children will make them proud. In essence, easy children help us to feel like excellent parents and teachers. Consequently, they receive positive feedback from us and a very positive interactive cycle is set in motion.

Of course, not every child is born with an easy temperament. Slow-to-warm youngsters tend to be more cautious, needing additional time to acclimate to new situations. Their behavior often prompts people to describe them as shy, timid, or anxious. Their innate temperament requires more time to become acclimated to new people and new situations than their less cautious peers. Many well-meaning parents, not realizing that shyness is an inborn trait for a number of youngsters, will often exhort their children to say hello, look people in the eye, and go out and make friends.

I have seen young children in my office who feel as if they are total disappointments to their parents since their parents constantly tell them that they should be putting in more of an effort to relate to people. One six-year-old girl said that every day after school her mother asked, “Did you speak to other kids today?” While this question was obviously based on mother’s anxiety that her daughter be more outgoing, what mother was unaware

of was the role that inborn temperament played in her daughter's behavior and how this daily question was intensifying her daughter's distress. Her daughter would have given anything to feel at ease greeting others but was unable to do so given her intense anxiety. In the school environment, children who are shy often sit in terror at the thought of being called upon to answer a question or to read aloud.

In my workshops some parents and teachers have asked, "Isn't there anything we can do to help our shy children? Shouldn't we be teaching them some social skills?" The answer is that there are things we can say or do that will help our cautious child, but we must first recognize that telling shy children to say hello or look people in the eye typically increases their anxiety and withdrawal so that it has the opposite effect of what we desire. In next month's column I will describe some of the messages we can convey that will help rather than criticize shy children.

As the name implies, "difficult" children are very challenging to raise and educate. They often have problems adapting to new situations. Their behavior is frequently characterized by intense reactions and overreactions --the seemingly smallest upset triggers anger, tantrums, and meltdowns, features of their behavior that my friend and colleague Ross Greene has discussed in his book "The Explosive Child." These youngsters reveal little pleasure, rarely smile (one mother said that her son was born with a "permanent frown" on his face), typically seem tense, appear to be insatiable in their demands (their favorite words are "it isn't fair"), have problems with eating and sleeping, are inflexible, and demonstrate hypersensitivities (e.g., they are children who are very bothered by loud sounds or complain of the irritation caused by labels in their clothing). Difficult children from birth will have a greater struggle to make friends, get along with others, develop high self-esteem, and do well in school.

One mother of a difficult five-year-old summed up what it felt like to be the parent of a difficult child when she said, "My son made me feel like the most inadequate mother in the world from the moment I first held him." When I asked why she felt this way, she tearfully answered, "Dr. Brooks, do you know what it feels like to hold your newborn and he squirms out of your arms (many youngsters with difficult temperaments do not like to be held), do you know what it feels like to give him a bath and dry him off with a soft towel and he begins to cry (given the hypersensitivities of these children, they do not experience the towel as soft but rather like sandpaper), and do you know what it feels like when the bell or phone rings and he wakes up and won't fall back to sleep?"

Obviously, almost from the birth of her son this mother felt estranged from her own child. She received little pleasure from parenting him, felt as if she were inadequate, and also was very angry with him. Unlike the joys experienced by parents of a

temperamentally easy child, this mother experienced only frustration, disappointment, anger, and failure. Having a difficult child typically requires an inordinate amount of effort and patience, and the results may not reflect the energy that is expended. Parents have told me that they hesitate to take their temperamentally difficult child to a restaurant or sporting event or to the house of relatives for fear of how their child will behave and how it will reflect on their parenting.

Parents of difficult children typically face other problems including marital stress as well as receiving advice (better known as criticism) even from people they don't know. I often tell people in my workshops that none of us should ever judge another person's parenting unless we have walked in their shoes. I emphasize that I have been fortunate to meet many parents who are thoughtful, dedicated, and courageous, but you would never know this from the behavior of their difficult child.

When I first began to describe these temperamental differences in my workshops and writings, many parents and teachers wondered if these inborn characteristics were open to change. Could shy, timid children become more outgoing? Could difficult children become less tense, less rigid, less demanding? Do some easy children become less easy as they grow (even taking into consideration the changes that occur in adolescence)? The answer is that changes can and do take place. Jerome Kagan, a developmental psychologist at Harvard, has found that many shy babies become more gregarious by the time they are 10 years old. In contrast, some seemingly easy children become more timid. There are difficult children who become more at ease, more cooperative, and less demanding.

The basis of these changes is a complex process. Not unexpectedly, our own temperamental styles, goals, and expectations greatly influence our perception of and reaction to each child's unique style. Our reaction, in turn, will often play a significant role in the ways in which our child's temperament will undergo changes. Thus, as a first step to helping our children, it is important for parents and teachers to appreciate these innate differences so that we can become more empathic, develop more realistic goals and expectations for our youngsters, and respond to our children in ways that foster their confidence and self-esteem. (Although this column is focusing on adult-child relationships, the same kinds of issues exist in marital relationships or employer-employee relationships, topics which I may address in a future article.)

In terms of our role of parents, teachers, and other caregivers we must realize that if our children are to change, if our children are to feel more comfortable with themselves and in their relationships with us, then we must make the first changes and learn how to accommodate in reasonable ways to the temperament of our children. In my next column

I will share some thoughts about the process by which we can accomplish this challenging but very important task so that we might reinforce a positive relationship with our children and students, lessen friction and stress, and maximize their opportunities for a more satisfying, successful future.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>