

Differences from Birth: Responding to the Temperamentally Difficult Child

Part IV

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My last three columns have been devoted to the topic of how the inborn temperament of children influences their development and the ways in which adults respond to them. In my April column I focused on the characteristics of so-called “difficult” children. These youngsters may show some or all of the following behaviors: they are not easily satisfied, often feel adults are unfair, view the glass as half or totally empty, typically overreact to situations, are inflexible and unwilling to compromise if they do not get their way, and are prone to tantrums and outbursts. While some people have found the word “difficult” too negative and have applied other labels such as the “challenging” child or the “spirited” child, the fact remains that for most parents the task of raising these youngsters is more demanding and more emotionally draining than raising a temperamentally “easy” child.

I noted in last month’s article that there are actions that parents, teachers, and other adults can take to help temperamentally difficult children lead a more satisfying, optimistic life. I emphasized that these actions include: (a) becoming as knowledgeable as possible about temperamental differences in children so that we do not blame them (or ourselves) for causing their behaviors, (b) learning to accept our children for who they are rather than what we want them to be in order that we establish what is called a “goodness-of-fit” between our expectations and our child’s temperament, and (c) moving from a “crisis intervention” or reactive approach to a “crisis prevention” or proactive approach. A proactive parent consistently asks, “What can I do in advance to create an environment that will minimize my child’s difficulties and help my child learn more adaptive ways of handling problems?”

In this column and in my June column I will articulate what I believe to be some of the main guideposts necessary to develop and implement an effective proactive approach at home and at school. I decided to devote an additional column to this topic because of the many letters I have received in the past month from parents who are raising temperamentally difficult children. They not only asked important questions pertaining to interacting with their child but noted that they were looking forward to hearing my suggestions about assuming a crisis prevention, proactive stance.

I quickly discovered as I begin to write this month’s column that if I were to do justice to their questions and describe the components of a proactive approach in more than a cursory manner, one article would not suffice. It is for this reason that I will use

this as well as my column in June to examine this approach in greater detail. I should emphasize that the ideas articulated in this column are intended as general guidelines to be modified and applied based upon the particular characteristics of the child as well as the style and values of the parents and other adults in the child's life. It is not an exhaustive list but hopefully will provide key guideposts for interacting with temperamentally difficult children.

One other preliminary point before reviewing these guidelines. I believe that if your child's temperament is causing you and your family ongoing stress and tension, it may be helpful to seek assistance from a mental health professional who is well-versed in the pressures of raising these challenging youngsters. I should emphasize that in my clinical practice I often spend less time with the child and more time with parents and teachers. I do this since I have found that temperamentally difficult, inflexible, rigid children are less likely to change unless the adults in their lives are willing to make some initial changes.

Selected Guidelines for a Proactive Approach

1. Reflect upon your child's temperament and make a list of the behaviors that you would like to see changed; then ask yourself what are the truly important behaviors that should be addressed. Many parents have told me that the list they create pertaining to their temperamentally difficult youngsters fills several pages. Consequently, it is important to prioritize the behaviors. Some behaviors are not worth battling about while others pertaining to safety issues cannot be ignored.

For example, in one household parents stopped nagging their children about forgetting to put the cap on the toothpaste tube or pushing the toothpaste from the bottom of the tube since they realized there are more important issues involved in teaching children responsibility—also, I have never seen a study showing any correlation between remembering to put the cap on a toothpaste tube or from which end to press the tube and success later in life.

As you select which behaviors to focus upon, remember a few additional guidelines. Obviously, if your child's actions pertain to issues of safety and security, they deserve immediate attention. Once these urgent behaviors have been addressed, decide upon a couple of the most important behaviors that require modification—only a couple so that your agenda for change does not overwhelm your child. And in the selection process continue to ask yourself, "Is this issue really important? Is it worth the battle that is likely to ensue? Are there more important areas to which I should attend?"

To assist you to answer these questions assume what I call a "helicopter view." Rise above the situation and examine your children's lives from a helicopter perspective.

Look at where they've been, where they are at now, and where you hope they go. As one mother of a difficult nine-year-old girl told me after taking this helicopter view, "I didn't appreciate how much she really has changed. When you are struggling each day you sometimes forget what she was like just a year ago. There was something else I discovered when I took this helicopter view. I realized that certain things that I keep getting after her about that always lead to arguments might not be worth the fight, such as whether she makes her bed or finishes all of her breakfast."

2. Once you have selected a couple of behaviors, ask yourself, "Before I can expect my children to change, what is it that I can modify in my approach to make it easier for my children to alter their behaviors?" This question is not intended to suggest that parents are to blame for the behavior of their temperamentally difficult children but rather that they play an important role in helping to modify these behaviors.

As an illustration, a set of parents with three children characterized most meal times in their home as "very tense and problematic" because their youngest child, a five-year-old hyperactive boy with a difficult temperament, often "fell off his chair and crawled away from the table." They selected this behavior as a top priority to change since it had such a "disruptive impact on family life."

Their typical response was to yell at him and tell him to return to the table and "sit still" (a truly impossible task for this hyperactive child). They reported that this behavior had been occurring for years (we must remember that he was only five) and he had still not learned to sit in his seat during mealtime although they gave him constant reminders. The father said, "It's a pleasure to eat with our older two children, but I dread eating with him." When I wondered why they thought he wasn't sitting still, his mother said, "We know he is hyper, but there's no reason he can't sit for a half hour. Sometimes I feel he's doing it to get attention."

In my meeting I empathized with the parents' frustration. I also realized that if the situation in the house were to change it was important for the parents to take the first steps and change their ineffective "negative script" (please see my January, 2000 column about changing negative scripts). Consequently, I wondered what might occur if instead of yelling at their son they modified their usual approach and said, "We can see you need to move around. If you have to get up from the table that's okay as long as you don't disturb anyone. You can return when you're ready. We'll leave your food on the table until we're all finished."

At first, the parents, especially the father, were hesitant to do this, feeling they were giving in to the child. However, since their approach was not working, they were willing to attempt what I recommended, which included giving the same choice to the

two older siblings. This intervention worked very well. Their son got up a couple of times during each meal, walked into the other room, and then came back. The older siblings did not feel the need to get up. Dinner became a more relaxed time even with their five-year-old getting up from the table and, if anything, he became more responsible, not less, about finishing his meal.

Just recently at one of my parent workshops, a mother described her challenging daughter. “She always blames others for her problems. She never takes responsibility for anything. For example, if she bumps into a chair in the house she will blame me for putting the chair in her way. You can’t argue with her.”

I suggested that she shouldn’t argue but rather change her script and ask what she could do differently so as not to engage in a power struggle with her daughter. We discussed what the new script might be, “Thanks for telling me that the chair was not in the right place. Can you help me put it in the right place so no one will bump into it?” In offering this possible response I emphasized the importance of humor and playfulness in relating to temperamentally difficult youngsters (it also helps us to keep our sanity). In my workshops and clinical practice I often say, “If our kids are driving us crazy, let’s drive them a little crazy, but in a nice way. Let’s do something unpredictable. They will wonder what’s happening.” I say this with humor but my message is serious since I have witnessed firsthand how a small modification in our approach may lead to very positive changes in our children.

3. If the changes we make in our approach are to be effective we must practice empathy and see the world through the eyes of our temperamentally difficult child. This does not mean we endorse our child’s behavior, but rather we attempt to understand his/her perspective. If our child says, “You’re unfair, you never spend any time with me,” it is very easy to become defensive and say, “Yes, we do, you just don’t appreciate anything we do for you.” Such a comment will serve only to heighten the child’s defensiveness. Instead, we should first validate what our child is saying (validation does not imply you agree with her/his statement). We can say, “I’m glad you could tell us how you see things. We know that you feel we’re not always fair when we ask you to be in bed by a certain time or don’t buy you a toy. However, we see things differently. Maybe we can figure out what will help.”

Since temperamentally difficult children are known for their inflexibility, it would not be surprising if they were to respond with anger even when your comments are filled with understanding and empathy. If they do respond in a negative way it is best to say, “I know you feel this way, but I want you to think about what I have just said” and then avoid entering into a lengthy discussion or argument. Keep in mind that your child’s

way of viewing things will not change overnight, but it is important that once you understand his/her point of view and have devised a plan of action, you should maintain your plan in as calm and consistent a fashion as possible.

4. As implied in Guideline 3, articulate clearly what you see as the problem and ask your child if she/he also sees it as a problem. Some parents have said to me that certain behaviors are definitely problems (e.g., children insulting their siblings or children staying up well beyond their bedtime) so why should we ask our children if these are problems. However, I have found that what we as adults perceive to be problems may be at odds with what children perceive to be problems. Thus, when we ask them to change these behaviors, they feel we are being unfair and will be less motivated to modify their actions. If children disagree with our perspective we can always say, "I'm glad I asked if you saw it as a problem. Since you don't see things the same way I do, I would like to explain why I think this is a problem." Although this explanation may not be readily accepted, it can hopefully serve as the start of a productive dialogue.

I recall parents who regularly yelled at their eight-year-old son to put his toys away in the family room. His typical response was, "Why should I have to do it, I will just take them out tomorrow. You're always telling me what to do and bossing me around." The parents resorted to screaming back, "We always tell you what to do because you never do what you're supposed to." (I often suggest to parents that the words "always" and "never" used in this context are certain to lead to increased anger and a breakdown of communication; I have never met anyone who likes to be told that he/she "always" misbehaves or is "never" helpful.)

I discussed an alternative plan with the parents. They asked their son, "Do you know why we ask you to put your toys away?"

He quickly responded, "To make my life miserable."

The parents were prepared for this answer and said, "No wonder you wouldn't want to listen to what we say if you think we do it to make your life miserable." They then went on to explain why they saw leaving the toys out as a problem (e.g., it was difficult to walk in the room, toys could accidentally be stepped on or even thrown away). Much to their surprise their usually inflexible son did not enter into an argument with them, but actually listened. Since he was in a responsive mood they said, "Maybe you would like help cleaning up. It's your choice. Would you like to put the toys away by yourself or would you like one of us to do it with you?" Interestingly, the boy opted to do it himself.

While the results will not always be as positive as they were in this instance, there is more of a likelihood of success if parents keep in mind that one of the goals of a

proactive approach is to turn arguments into constructive discussions and gain agreement about problematic family issues. This goal will not be achieved if we expend all of our time and energy attempting to convince our temperamentally difficult children that their opinion of what is or is not a problem is wrong. As one temperamentally difficult child said to me, “I will outlast you and my parents.” Given that kind of mindset, adults working with difficult youngsters must walk a tightrope of validating what they are saying but offering a different perspective for their future consideration.

I hope that as parents and other adults reflect upon the points described in this column they will become more effective in interacting with temperamentally difficult children. In my June column I will continue this discussion of guidelines for raising and teaching these youngsters. I will also discuss the resilience that many of these children demonstrate when the adults in their lives provide the support and encouragement they need and learn to focus on their “islands of competence” and not just their areas of weakness.

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