

Differences from Birth: Responding to the Temperamentally Difficult Child

Part V

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This is the last of my five-part series about the inborn temperament of children. In my last two columns I described several strategies for adopting a proactive or crisis prevention approach when interacting with our temperamentally difficult children. I noted that 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 last month’s column I outlined several important components of a proactive approach that included: (a) reflecting upon your child’s temperament and making a list of the behaviors that you would like to see changed, (b) prioritizing the list in terms of what behaviors need immediate attention, (c) practicing empathy and seeing the world through the eyes of your temperamentally difficult child so that you can respond more effectively to her/his behaviors, and (d) articulating clearly what you see as the problem and asking your child if she/he also sees it as a problem since agreement that a problem exists is an important step towards solving it. Please refer to my April and May columns for a more in-depth discussion of these and other points. In this column I will offer some further thoughts and observations of a proactive approach.

Additional Guidelines for a Proactive Approach

1. Engage your child as an active participant in solving the issues or problems at hand. As psychologist and friend Myrna Shure, who developed the “I Can Problem Solve” program, has so eloquently described in her books “Raising a Thinking Child” and “Raising a Thinking Preteen,” even impulsive children can be taught and encouraged to think of different solutions to problems and to consider what approach might work best.

I recall a family who had a temperamentally difficult young adolescent son. They were constantly reminding him to take his medication in the morning since he often “forgot” to do so. In a family therapy session, he acknowledged that the medication did help (this agreement facilitated a problem-solving attitude), but added, “I hate when my parents remind me to do things. I always feel they’re nagging me. They seem to enjoy being on my back.”

I empathized with him and said that no kid likes to be nagged. Then I wondered that if he should forget to take his medication could he think of a way for his parents to remind him that wouldn’t feel like they were nagging him. He said, “I don’t like them to

talk to me.” I asked, “Is there another way they can remind you?” Half-kidding and perhaps half-not, he said, “Let them hold up a sign.” The parents and I said that was a great idea and that is what they did. It actually worked! Its success was based in great part on this young adolescent arriving at the solution so that he had a greater sense of ownership for what transpired.

A postscript to this story was several months later a parenting magazine had an article about the use of signs to remind your children to do things. I cut it out and gave him a copy, saying, “You had a brilliant idea. Even a national magazine is writing about it.” With a smile I added, “My only regret is that they didn’t quote you.” In a humorous way, he responded, “That’s okay, they don’t know about me yet, but someday they will.”

I should emphasize that if a child is asked about a possible solution to a problem and says “I don’t know what to do,” parents and other adults can respond, “That’s okay, it sometimes takes a few days to think of what to do, so let’s take a little time.” Obviously, if the problem presents an immediate issue of safety or security, we may not have the luxury of waiting several days. In that case, parents may have to provide possible solutions, but they should always offer two or three and ask the child which one might work best. The act of having the child consider which option might prove best and then selecting that option reinforces a sense of ownership. It is not unusual that when parents offer possible solutions, children and adolescents will frequently modify what the parent has said and place their own distinct mark on the solution.

2. Once a solution is agreed upon, it is important to develop consequences with your child if she/he does not follow through on the arrangement. This can be done by saying to your child, “What we plan to do sounds as if it will work but what should the consequences be if you don’t follow through on what you have agreed upon?” These questions are important not only because they empower children and help them to develop problem-solving skills, but also because children with difficult temperaments frequently live in the “here and now” and don’t think ahead about consequences.

It has been my experience that the establishment of consequences with the input of your child increases the probability that your child will remember the consequences and also minimizes your child feeling you are unfair since she/he was involved in creating these consequences. If you do not concur with the consequences your child recommends you need not go along. Instead, explain why you do not agree and see if an alternative solution is possible. Also, if your children feel they have some input, it will be easier for them to accept certain “nonnegotiable” rules and consequences that you establish. Many children benefit from actually making a list of expected behaviors and

consequences, especially since the list serves to help children keep their responsibilities in mind.

Obviously, as noted above, when issues relate to safety and security such as your child riding a bike into a busy street or playing with matches, parents must be decisive in terms of stopping the behavior and having immediate consequences (e.g., taking the bike away for several days). However, even in emergency situations, parents should discuss the problems in a calm fashion with their children so that their children learn from rather than resent the parents' actions.

3. As I have written in previous columns, I recommend that parents set aside a "special time" alone with each of their children. If a child is young, the special time might occur each night for 15 minutes when the parents read to or play a game with the child. The parent might emphasize the "specialness" of the time by saying, "When I play or read to you, it's such a special time that even if the phone rings I won't answer it." As children get older you might alternate weeks taking each out to dinner or to a game or to a favorite activity. In interviews I have conducted with adults, they often recall with fondness these times spent by themselves with a parent.

This approach is especially useful for difficult children who often experience parents as being unfair and not providing them the same amount of time or love as their siblings. Establishing a special time each evening or week is a concrete representation that equal time is being given to all in the family. It helps to minimize sibling rivalry since each child knows that he/she is receiving a time alone with each parent.

4. Another component of a proactive approach is for parents to set aside a "family meeting time" each week with their children in order to have a built-in structure to discuss family issues. Too many families may be seen as "reactive families" characterized by family members catching each other "on the run" to consider important matters, a practice likely to fail. Some families attempt to use mealtimes as family discussion times. I am not against families talking during meals. However, based upon my experience with many families with whom I have worked I have discovered that given what parents may wish to discuss with their temperamentally difficult children and how their children might respond, it is best to have a separate time other than meals for these discussions to take place so as not to produce heartburn and indigestion.

I have even found that many children with difficult temperaments like to have an "agenda" on which they can place items for consideration. This agenda need not result in a stodgy meeting, but rather a meeting where all parties feel that their views are being heard. Again, this is especially important for youngsters with "difficult" temperaments

who often believe that “no one listens to them.” These family meetings provide a platform for their views.

5. The final component of a proactive approach that I should like to highlight has appeared in various forms in my previous articles, namely, that we must strive to identify, reinforce, and display the “islands of competence” or areas of strength of all of our children. Every child has islands of competence, but with temperamentally difficult youngsters whose behaviors can be so problematic much of the time, it is easy to lose sight of their many strengths. However, when we involve children in activities that bring them a sense of pride and accomplishment not only do they have less time to demonstrate their difficult behaviors, but very importantly their sense of self-esteem, motivation, and responsibility are enhanced (please see my December, 1999 column).

I know temperamentally difficult children who (a) read to younger children or help them learn a game, (b) are talented artists whose artwork is displayed in the entrance of their school, (c) are “enlisted” as messengers in school to provide them a constructive outlet for their hyperactivity, (d) teach their parents how to use the computer, (e) take care of plants, or (f) write “manuals” about various subjects. The list of possible activities and accomplishments is endless. The most important thing is to remember that if our temperamentally difficult children are to succeed they must have adults in their lives who believe in them and provide them with ample opportunities to shine and to succeed.

Some very frustrated parents have told me that it is difficult to locate their child’s “islands of competence.” I can empathize with these parents, but I also encourage them to keep looking. Children know when we have given up on them, when we are totally disappointed in them, when we no longer believe in them. The outcome of such a situation is resentment and anger. The task of articulating and using our children’s “islands of competence” may prove daunting, but as I always say, “What is the alternative?”

I should note that many, if not all, of these features of a proactive approach apply not only to the home environment but to the school environment as well. Children with difficult temperaments can be engaged in understanding their problems and developing strategies and solutions with their teachers. Educators can use a prevention approach so that certain problematic behaviors are avoided or re-directed. For example, as I noted above many temperamentally difficult children who are hyperactive can be given “jobs” that involve physical activity such as being a monitor who brings messages to the office; not only does this serve to allow children a needed physical outlet, but it can also boost their self-esteem since they are making a contribution to the school.

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There are two other points I want to address briefly, each of which can easily be a separate column. The first concerns medication. I am often asked by parents of temperamentally difficult children whether medication can assist their children. While I believe that we should first implement the steps or strategies I have proposed in this and previous columns and then assess their effectiveness, I also know that for some children who are highly anxious or depressed or impulsive, medications can be a very useful adjunct to these other interventions. However, it is vital that when parents obtain a medication consult they do so from a professional with expertise in the use of medications with children; such an expert will obtain information from parents and teachers on an ongoing basis and also meet regularly with the child.

I have interviewed many children about the reasons they believe they are on medication and I am concerned about some of the answers I have received. For example, one girl told me, "I'm a bad girl." A boy said, "I was born with half a brain. The medication can fill in the other half." A number of children have said that the pill is the only thing that helps them to control themselves and be better. While there is some truth to this last statement, it is at odds with the development of high self-esteem and resilience since it places control of one's behavior on an external force, namely, a pill. I recommend that parents say to their child, "The pill will help you to remain calm or focus better (it is best to use words the child has used) and then once you are calmer you can make better decisions about how to behave." What this last statement accomplishes is to communicate to children that they have control and ownership for their behavior, a belief that is consonant with an emotionally healthier outlook.

The second point pertains to how temperamentally difficult children will turn out as they reach adulthood. We know that the road these children take will typically be filled with many more obstacles than the road traveled by temperamentally easy children. While I do not believe in denying or minimizing a child's problems, we must avoid becoming overly pessimistic about any child's future. I remain optimistic about the resiliency of children, even those who are born with a difficult temperament.

I believe that when we are empathic and realistically hopeful, when we see the beauty, strength, and potential in each youngster, and when we relate to children with an appreciation of and respect for their unique temperamental make-up, then the label "difficult" may indeed be increasingly replaced by the words "spirited" or "challenging." I hope that some of the ideas expressed in my past few columns will help to reinforce this more positive mindset.

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My best wishes for a relaxing and satisfying summer.

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