

Raising a Difficult Child to Success

Infancy—Temperament and Attachment

Mary McFadden

The “goodness of fit” between parent(s) and child is perhaps one of the most vital aspects of successfully raising a child, particularly a child considered temperamentally difficult.

Temperament, derived from the word temper and often associated with an angry state of mind, refers more accurately to “patterns of attention, behavior, and emotion that are present during the initial months of life” appearing in a variety of situations and persisting through time (Hinshaw, 2010). Critically important is the way parents read, interact with and help regulate their child’s emotions and behavior. Conversely, the attachment or bond between parents and child can be greatly affected by temperament.

Temperament appears to be a “hardwiring” that affects many tendencies for how an individual relates to the world. Some babies (and later children and adults) are considered to be “temperamental,” inferring difficult, while other babies are considered easy. Emotional intensity and adaptability seem to be key indicators. Nine core temperamental descriptions, measurable in the first year of life, exist in the classic model: 1) Activity level; 2) Regularity; 3) Distractibility; 4) Initial reaction (approach vs. withdrawal); 5) Adaptability; 6) Persistence; 7) Intensity of reaction (positive or negative); 8) Sensitivity (to touch, sight or sound); and 9) Quality of mood (predominantly positive or negative) (Hinshaw, 2010).

Another six core aspects of temperament have been proposed by Mary Rothbard, University of Oregon. 1) Fearful distress; 2) Irritable distress; 3) Attention span; 4) Activity level; 5) Positive affect; and 6) Regularity of rhythm (Hinshaw, 2010). Other temperament researchers may use their own checklists to define a difficult or easy temperament. Regardless of the finer points of the terminology, there are similarities and consistencies across researchers in how they define temperament.

Different temperaments seen throughout the population are believed to be an adaptive occurrence in evolution. Evolution relies on diversity shaped by mutation, therefore certain traits and their mutations must have been advantageous in our development as a species. Having a variety of temperaments, highly sociable vs. more reflective or more active vs. quieter individuals could have helped ensure our survival (Hinshaw, 2010).

It is assumed that temperament is stable over a lifetime. What changes, depending upon the individual's age, is how the traits of temperament show up. Activity level generally stays the same. This is a relatively simple expectation. The way non-adaptability traits show up in a baby and progress to adulthood may be somewhat less predictable as these traits can show up in various ways. For example, a baby that has a difficult time adapting to simple changes in routine may become a child who struggles with changes throughout the school day and later develops more complex patterns of adaptability problems into adulthood. Sometimes adults with difficulty adapting will characterize themselves as having "OCD" or being perfectionists. Usually, a look back will reveal these traits showing up at a very early age (Hinshaw, 2010).

We need to be cautious when we use temperament traits to predict an absolute path the individual's life will take. A difficult temperament does not have to predict a teen life of delinquency or adult life of crime. Many other factors intermingle with temperament to help determine the course of an individual's life. Parents and home environment are essential in the formula for determining a successful or unsuccessful outcome for a "difficult" child. There is a fine line between coddling a child with adaptability challenges, and forcing or pushing such a child. Using "clean and consistent limits, unemotionally yet with flexibility, adaptation is likely to be better" (Hinshaw, 2010). To a parent or caregiver negotiating this balance can feel more like an art than a science, and assessments and techniques must often be employed every single day on a situation-by-situation basis.

I think it is important to view temperament in this light – that all temperaments can serve a positive purpose in our world. Having this viewpoint can help parents ensure healthy attachment to their child regardless of temperament. A deep parent-child bond and closeness is highly favored in natural selection, and the long bonding period of humans makes this even more important. Unfortunately this strong bond doesn't always exist between parents and their child,

or there may be a strong bond between just one of the parents and the child. This can be greatly due to temperament – the child's and the parent's. Attachment with a parent relies heavily on the interaction between parent and child. The responsiveness and caring of parents has a strong effect on the development of a child with a particular attachment style.

Attachment studies by Mary Ainsworth called the “Strange Situation” placed enough stress on the 12-to 18-month-old babies being studied to expose their level of attachment to their caregivers. In the study room the caregiver would spend time with the child and then exit, followed by a stranger entering the room, then exiting. Upon return of the caregiver, various levels of attachment were observed. The important finding was that the infant's behavior when the parent left the room could be predicted by his or her temperament. A fussy baby would cry and react much more intensely to the caregiver exit than a typically calm baby. The baby's response to the parent's return to the room was an important indicator of the parent's sensitivity towards their child and the child's temperament. Strong attachment bonds would result in the baby being soothed much more quickly upon the parent's return and even whether the baby would then feel calm enough to explore the room. Parents who have sensitively reacted to their baby's temperament have created a “secure base” in their baby (Hinshaw, 2010).

If studies have shown that 60-65% of infants are securely attached to their parents, with a third or more not securely attachment, this indicates how extremely important the understanding between parents and their child's temperament is (Hinshaw, 2010). Yet, how many parents have never considered their child's temperament, or worse, don't care about it? It can be daunting to consider the toll on human development as children grow up misunderstood by their parents or punished for their temperament. On the other hand, children who have less than easy temperaments but are understood and nurtured by their parents have much better odds of healthy psychological development. The connection between temperament and attachment, the “goodness of fit”, is one that should not be overlooked since it can be so crucial to individual development and success. This term does not mean that a parent's temperament needs to match or fit his or her child's, but that the parent is sensitive to the child's temperament and responds in the most positive and consistent way possible.

As someone who successfully raised a daughter who met all of the criteria of a “difficult child” and is now a happy, successful and dynamic adult, I can confidently quote the words of temperament expert Dr. Stanley Turecki, the author of *The Difficult Child*, a book that became my family’s daily guide in the 1980s. “Not every difficult child is destined for greatness. Each one, however, deserves the opportunity to realize his potential. The techniques and principles in this book will help to provide this chance for your child. Try always to apply them in an atmosphere of kindness and love. Respect the child, appreciate his strengths and abilities, and always remember that he is an individual. As time goes on, who know what dreams can come true for your child” (Turecki, 1989).

REFERENCES

- Hinshaw, S. P. (2010) *Origins of the Human Mind*. Great Courses. The Teaching Company.
- Turecki, S., (1989). *The difficult child* (2nd ed). New York, NY: Bantam Books.