

Are you frustrated because your child's behavior doesn't correlate with what the baby books are telling you is normal? Do you feel guilty because you are impatient with your child's behavior? Do you think you are the only one with a child who is difficult?

While some gifted and attention-disordered traits can be troublesome to a child and his/her parents, they are possible strengths when the child matures. As for the parents of difficult children, the trait that drives the parent up the wall now may actually be the very trait that is responsible for that child's success as an adult.

Children are resources in need of maturing. Most of the time the problem behavior situations are temporary, but how adults react can cause permanent damage. Children won't always remember what you **taught** them, but they will always remember how you **treated** them.

YOUR CHILD'S TEMPERAMENT

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Every child is unique, with differing temperament needs. Each temperament profile shows some areas of strength that can be encouraged, as well as some areas of weakness that the parent can learn to understand. With a high-maintenance or difficult child, the weaknesses tend to be exaggerated, but some problems presented by your child are related to underdeveloped temperament needs. Since this temperament will remain throughout the child's life, how and to what degree the child expresses this temperament can be affected by upbringing, environment, education and spiritual development. Temperament determines how the child interacts with the environment and the people around him/her, especially determining perception and understanding of oneself and others.

The instrument available in many counseling centers and used for assessing temperament is the Firo-B questionnaire, which generates a TAP (Temperament Analysis Profile) and provides the parent with in-depth information about a child's strengths and weaknesses in the area of Inclusion (mind), Control (will) and Affection (emotion). A clinical TAP gives an overview of the child in these three behavior areas. Each child has varying needs to different degrees in all three areas. These needs have the potential to lead to conflict, stress, spiritual setbacks and emotional breakdown. Emotional illness, eating, sleeping, drinking habits, drug and sexual addiction, susceptibility to alcoholism and depression are determined in the temperament and often enhanced by environmental history. Not only does this screening profile save a lot of time and money, it cuts through the normal process of denial and defense

A DIFFICULT CHILD OR A DIFFICULT SITUATION

by Sharon Otis, Ed.D., Ph.D.



that often adds to loss of freedom and joy, emotionally, physically and spiritually.

The following are the five basic temperaments:

- **Sanguine in Inclusion** — extrovert of a very high intensity
- **Melancholy in Inclusion** — introvert, a very private and serious person
- **Supine in Inclusion** — an extrovert, although he/she appears to be introvert
- **Phlegmatic in Inclusion** — extrovert/introvert; relates well to systems and ideas, tasks and people, able to socialize when the need arises
- **Choleric in Inclusion** — extrovert of a highly selective nature

CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

Divorce and separation rank as high as death on the life stress change inventory, which can accelerate the aging and disease mechanisms. The significance of change affects stress levels, for stress is correlated to disease. I remind my clients that their chances of getting ill increase according to the degree of stress in their lives. People's chances of getting ill while going through this stress are statistically higher than the average.¹

Trends in family patterns indicate a need to help children adjust to change and to process the loss of family unity in order to grow to be healthy, happy adults. This can be accomplished by individual and group sessions. Adults, too, can learn to process their feelings and discover strength from God and their support network. Remember, the children are experiencing the same confusion as the parent and looking to the parent for direction.

Divorce recovery is not a straight line upward. Instead, divorce recovery is a process of hills and valleys. It is important not to medicate the valleys. The coping mechanisms learned during the valleys will last a lifetime. The stages of divorce are the same for everyone, but individuals grow through the stages with different levels of intensity and with different lengths of time at each stage. The valleys become less deep and further apart with time and growth. The effect of divorce on children differs with the age of the child. The following are observable behaviors that may occur during or right after a divorce:

- In preschool children there may be regression in toilet training, clinging to security objects (blankets), whining and crying, reverting back to the bottle and clinging to parents. Furthermore, there is usually wishful thinking of parental reconciliation.
- Seven- and eight-year-olds can be moody normally, but there is regression to babyish behavior and temper tantrums. There can be alienation from parents and self-blame.
- Nine- and ten-year-olds become very busy, organized, show some anger at parents and wanting to please.
- Teenagers typically stay in denial and repress their feelings. Moreover, they can be aggressive and hostile to adults. There may be school problems and detachment from parents.

One of the best barometers for determining whether school-aged children are having emotional problems during this period is the school nurse. Frequently, children who are not able to express feelings openly, manifest them in physical symptoms. The way a parent handles the divorce is a direct reflection on the child's happiness and development.

Parents and counselors are presented with a perplexing problem. Of all life's stress events, the events of divorce and separation require the greatest amount of readjustment, and statistics reveal that in an average classroom, one in five children will be experiencing divorce. A 1984 study I conducted in elementary school guidance indicated that counselor-consultation and intervention could be successful in reducing the behavior problems of elementary school children.¹

There is a strong indication in the literature of a need for a good working model for divorce in counseling centers and schools.¹ Counselors can offer students the opportunity to develop strengths in sensitivity to others' feelings and coping skills that may last a lifetime. During this time, children can learn life skills that provide perseverance, character and hope (Romans 5:4).

ADOLESCENCE — DEVELOPMENTAL DISCIPLINE

These are trying times for parents and teachers. Puberty cannot be rushed, as it is unique to each child. Girls are generally two years earlier than boys in this process. Boys are fourteen or fifteen, while girls may be ten-and-a-half to eleven years old.

It is important that the ten- to twelve-year-old understands and has a basic knowledge of the birth

process. At this age, students need to understand the physiological changes that are coming. It is common for children to be curious and confused due to mass media, but they may seek advice from peers rather than parents and teachers. If the parents put off discussions of puberty and the changes that occur from year to year, the adolescent enters puberty unaware and unprepared. Parents and teachers must look at their own values and attitudes to have clear thinking.

Groups or cliques are extremely important at this age. Fighting or arguing becomes a part of friendship as children build loyalty and the capacity to stand up for each other, even though problems related to different maturation levels within their own age group arise. Social affairs may begin before the child is ready, especially boys. They are not ready or interested but are made to feel dating is expected. Most adolescents would prefer to move more slowly.

Mood swings are prevalent in adolescence, including being over-critical of adults. The adolescent is quick to argue, bicker and disagree. Minor delinquent behaviors need to be dealt with and amends made. It is best to trust and respect the adolescent's decision than to show lack of confidence in him/her. If a mistake is made, correction should be friendly, matter of fact and firm. Understanding the pattern of growth, being affectionate and recognizing skills and hobbies can enhance stability and encourage the defiant child to return to parental values.

TEENAGER — DEVELOPMENTAL DISCIPLINE

Being able to understand the spirit-filled life, the mother/father relationship and development helps give the parent a frame of reference. "Now what?" you ask. Initiate a plan of action. Be sure all parties agree before embarking on a certain strategy. The child will be quick to identify the weak link or inconsistency with the plan. Yet, without boundaries and consequences, children will be unruly.

The teens are a precariously difficult time and cause parents the most stress. One of the toughest balancing acts is that between affirming a teenager and giving him or her the guidelines and boundaries needed. Below are some of the changes teens go through:

- *Teenagers begin to pull away from their parents in ways that can be alarming for folks who have previously had a close relationship with their children.*
- *Teens may suddenly start retreating into their bedrooms and keeping the door closed (making Moms and Dads feel rejected).*
- *Teenagers do not come home from school bubbling over with information about their day as they did when in elementary school.*
- *Teens typically give short answers with no details when parents seek information.*

Further undermining the once-close relationship between parent and child is the adolescent tendency to look for and find the personal weaknesses of their mothers and fathers. However, their teen is only doing the

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necessary work of individuation by de-idealizing the parents, seeing them as human beings.

Parents are amazed to hear that their kid is not the only one who believes that natural laws and social conventions do not apply to him or her. All adolescents go through a period in their lives — hopefully a short one — when they believe they are immortal, invincible and not bound by rules of conduct or courtesy. This explains why teenagers — particularly boys — engage in high-risk behaviors without giving thought to possible consequences. It also explains why many teenagers do not think about how their actions or words affect other people. Just as toddlers have to be reminded to share, clean up and say “please” and “thank you,” teenagers have to be encouraged to think about other people and to do their part in taking care of the family, house, yard and vehicles.

Moms and dads need to hear that these teen years are their last chance to work on a relationship with their teenage children, which will enable them to have close ties with their adult children later.

Using the idea of an emotional bank account, counselors urge parents to make “deposits” and to be aware of “withdrawals.” Deposits are any actions or words that build up, nurture or encourage the teen, such as spending time alone with him/her or giving focused attention. Basically, this means being “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (James 1:19).

In addition, parents are encouraged to practice “random acts of kindness” — doing good deeds for their children which communicate, “I love you; you’re really special to me.” Such activity does not mean being codependent and cleaning up after the children all the time or habitually doing things that children should be doing for themselves.

THE GIFTED CHILD

School boards and administrations do not have a problem funding money and services for children who fall within one or two deviations below the norm. Why then do they hesitate to provide services and enrichment for the children two or even three deviations *above* the norm? These children are potentially our untapped, greatest natural resources. Educators, unless working directly with these children, can’t realize that these children do not know that they are a special resource or that they have potential.

When I screen children for ADHD, I also screen for giftedness at the same time. Many times when children are bored, they become a behavior problem. A gifted child can be very creative with his/her curiosity, while becoming bored by inactivity. The characteristics of sanguine, gifted and hyperactive are similar. It’s hard to tell whether you have an ADHD child, a gifted child, a compulsive sanguine or all three. Many parents are relieved to know that their problems may actually be stem from the children’s inborn temperament.

More often than not, these children feel inadequate. Younger, gifted children take in large amounts of stimulus but lack the cognitive ability to process the information. Their emotional, physical and intellectual growth is not in sync with that of other children in their age group. Accordingly, such children want the world to be fair and don’t understand why it isn’t. The good news is that gifted children qualify for services under the handicap act, public law 94-142, which allows for the special needs of gifted children to be addressed.¹ The affective characteristics for gifted children are:

- Gifted children take in a large accumulation of emotional information of which they are unaware because of immature cognitive development.
- Gifted children are idealistic with a sense of justice.
- Idealism and justice go along with a strong need for consistency between abstract values and personal actions.
- Gifted children have high expectations of self and others, which often leads to high levels of frustration with self, others and situations.
- The gifted child has a heightened self-awareness accompanied by feelings of being “different.”

Thinking skills games have become an integral part of gifted education. They are a way to teach logic, lateral thinking and creative problem-solving wits. They will also improve social and communication skills. These games are available in many toy stores. The following list names a few examples of games and will give an idea of what kind of materials are helpful to the gifted child.

- Cosmic Encounter; Equations; ergo; The Force; Foursight; Mastermind; Netherworld; Othello; Tripples; Ungame; and Vectors.

CONCLUSION

Group and individual self-esteem strategies are important to help the child see himself or herself to learn what the future holds. A child needs to develop a frame of reference and understanding of his/her own strengths and weaknesses so that he/she may better understand the differences in others. Affective education has been known to increase a child’s ability to make decisions, think critically and encourage risk taking. In fact, the development of self-esteem is directly contingent upon the child’s environment, his relationship with others and his experiences. ▼

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