

Strategies for Parenting Children with Difficult Temperament



by Karen Stephens

Children are born with an inborn temperament, a preferred style of relating to people and events. Temperament is indicated by behavior that clusters into three categories: easy, slow-to-warm up, and difficult. No category makes a child *good* or *bad*. They merely describe a child's response patterns.

Some children (approximately 10-20%) are born with "difficult temperament." Traits include: high, often impulsive activity level; extra sensitive to sensory stimulation; overwhelmed by change in routines and new experiences; intense, inflexible reactions; easily distracted *or* incredibly focused; adapt slowly to change, not able to calm themselves well; irregular biological rhythms, such as hunger/sleep schedules; rapid, intense, mood swings resulting in acting out or withdrawing completely.

Your discipline interactions can clue you into your child's temperament. Parents struggling with difficult temperament say they continually remind and nag; name-call, yell, bribe, plead, make empty threats; give into power-struggles; feel as if their child "calls all the shots" or "rules the roost"; over-react; argue with co-parent over discipline; or give up trying to discipline at all.

None of those characteristics make life easy, for kids or parents. But children with difficult temperament can learn to cope with their sensitivities. If they don't learn, they can become confused, frustrated, and hopeless. In addition, they will most likely have to endure constant negative feedback which creates a vicious cycle of discouragement.

Children with difficult temperament do require extra time, guidance, and patience. But all children can be raised to be well-adjusted people with positive self esteem. It takes parenting finesse.

Effective parents develop attitudes, guidance strategies, and communication skills that work with, rather than against, a child's temperament. *Difficult* children can learn to be self-controlled, cooperative, and adaptable. Family, neighbors, child care professionals, and school teachers are first to show children the way. Here are some tips:

Dealing with Difficult Temperaments

- Provide the fundamentals. Children well nourished with enough sleep and the right foods cope best. Daily, give children personalized time, attention, and affection.
- Focus on strengths; look for the positive. Voice your appreciation whenever a child is flexible, positive, or adaptable.
- Avoid name-calling and labeling kids as "hyper," "problem child" or "trouble maker." Labels chip away at self-esteem.

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- Encourage self-awareness and coping strategies. Example: “Starting a new child care is hard. I know you aren’t happy about it. We’ll visit several times before you stay all day. What can you do to get to know the children there?”
- Use reflection to help children recognize options. “It looks like that sweater feels too scratchy. Can you find something in your closet that feels better?”
- Be patient, empathize, and interpret temperament traits. Try: “It’s hard for you to sit still a long time. Hold on, we’ll be at the park soon. See how many stop signs you can find.” Or “It’s frustrating adjusting to home after visiting with grandpa. Remember, first you brush your teeth, take a bath, and then we read a story before bed.”
- Maintain a predictable schedule. Warn children of changes in routine so they aren’t caught off guard. “Today we’re taking care of Tony because his parents are out of town.”
- Try to make smooth transitions. For instance, before it’s time to leave the library, let children know when they have time for one more book and then stick to your decision.
- Distractible children hear one thing at a time. Give children simple, step by step directions so they can succeed.
- If your child is overwhelmed by too many choices, limit the number. “Here are two videos you can watch. Which one do you choose?”
- Keep your home calm and predictable. Loud television, music, or family arguments will stress any child, but especially those with difficult temperament.
- Make sure kids get hands-on active play daily; it helps them use energy constructively. A children’s discovery museum engages these kids more than going to a sit-down children’s concert. Avoid over-scheduling children, but consider a lesson that’s a good outlet for energy, such as swimming, gymnastics, or dance lessons.
- Provide more structure if a child regularly becomes overwhelmed and loses control. Maintain predictable wake-up and bedtimes, regular snack and meal times, and have a plan for what will happen each day. On errands, provide structure by giving child a job to do, such as to look for a specific type of cereal as you shop.
- Create safe, cozy and calming spaces in your home where a child can relax or re-gain control when upset or over-stimulated. Remind him/her of relaxing things as such as coping strategies, a favorite stuffed animal, toy, music, or game.
- Rehearse changes that can be anticipated. For instance, before going to the dentist, act out what will happen first, second, and so on.
- Respect children’s preferences in terms of food taste, scent, and texture. It’s counter-productive to force a child to eat an egg salad sandwich if it comes up in two seconds. Role model flexibility by serving eggs in a way your child can tolerate.
- Coach children towards self control. Every child can be impulsive, but especially spirited children. Help them master language to express feelings. Remind them to find non-aggressive ways to achieve goals.
- Help children regain control during or after tantrums. “You’re yelling too loud. When you speak more quietly, I’ll listen.” “Here’s a tissue for your tears. Find another way to show me what you want.” “You’re so frustrated you’re throwing a fit. Breathe slower and more deeply; it can help you calm down.”
- Model and encourage positive social skills, such as trading, negotiating, sharing, inviting others to play, asking before entering others’ play, offering to help others, asking for help, and sharing play ideas.

- Choose your battles wisely. Avoid power struggles. When disciplining, use clear direction and enforce age-appropriate limits with reasonable, related, and respectful consequences. Avoid over-reacting, raising your voice, or issuing false threats and ultimatums. Deal with behavior problems calmly and matter-of-factly. This will help your child gain control and develop trust in your support and guidance.
- If family life becomes unbearable, a child psychologist or family therapist can help.

Read More About It

- *Raising Your Spirited Child: A Guide for parents whose child is more intense, sensitive, perceptive, persistent, energetic* by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.
- *Raising Your Spirited Child Workbook* by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.
- *Kids, Parents and Power Struggles* by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.
- *The Difficult Child* by Stanely Turecki with Leslie Tonner. New York: Bantam Books, 1989.
- *The Challenging Child: Understanding, Raising and Enjoying the Five "Difficult" Types of Children* by Stanley Greenspan, M.D. with Jacqueline Salmon. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1995.
- *Understanding Temperament: Strategies for Creating Family Harmony* by Lyndall Shick. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press, Inc. 1998.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.