

# PEDIATRIC PSYCHOLOGY

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## Management of Behavioral Problems in Children

### Introduction

We would all love to have a simple cookbook or manufacturer's recommendation for the operation and maintenance of children. Many of the "pop" books on parenting give one the impression that if we just follow a simple one-two-three approach, then our children will all become successful doctors and lawyers. Unfortunately, parenting is not as easy as that. Nevertheless, parenthood can be much more survivable if parents learn some basic management techniques predicated on a firm understanding of the specific temperamental style of their child. The aim of this paper is to begin with a general discussion of temperament in children (as adapted largely from Turecki (1989)) and then conclude with some basic strategies in dealing with both temperamentally difficult and behaviorally challenging children. My premise is that children are not born with behavioral difficulties. Rather, infants sign into this world with basic temperamental traits which, if mismanaged, can develop into significant behavioral problems and perhaps eventually into more pathologic oppositional-defiant or conduct disorders.

It is my belief that if we can come to understand the temperamental qualities of a child, be they positive or negative, then we can learn to better manage them and thus avoid turning the child into a behavioral monster by misapplied and/or inappropriate discipline techniques.

### Historical Background

Temperament is not exactly a modern idea. In fact, the humoral theory of Hippocrates and Galen (that mental health/temperament was dependent on the delicate balance of four "humors" or fluids of the body) which evolved in the ancient world has to one degree or another been a dominant force in western civilization up until the nineteenth century.

After several decades of disfavor in the first half of this century, temperament has again reemerged on more sound scientific grounds. This renewed interest in temperament is largely due to the pioneering work of Drs. Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas and their New York Longitudinal Study (NYLS) which began in the 1950's (Carey, 1990). Chess and Thomas followed 133 persons from infancy to young adulthood beginning in 1956 and found that 10% of their sample was difficult temperamentally. Furthermore, another 15% were slow-to-warm-up and these were especially more

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## Management of Behavioral Problems in Children

prone to develop behavior problems between ages 2 and 10 years. Other significant risk factors were excessive persistence, distractibility, or markedly high or low activity. Overall, they found that temperament played a very important role in the etiology and evolution of adjustment disorders in childhood and adolescence. Most important, Chess and Thomas emphasized that temperament is not in itself pathologic. Rather, if a clinical problem emerges, it is the result of an interaction between the child and the environment. That is, difficult children remain essentially free of adjustment problems if they are managed skillfully by their caretakers.

### Turecki's nine temperamental traits:

Briefly, the nine temperamental traits as delineated by Turecki (1989, pp. 16 and 17) are:

- (a) Activity level: How active or restless is the child generally, from an early age?
- (b) Distractibility: How easily is the child distracted? Can he pay attention?
- (c) Intensity: How loud is the child generally, whether happy or unhappy?
- (d) Regularity: How predictable is the child in his patterns of sleep, appetite, or bowel habits?
- (e) Persistence: Once involved with something, does the child stay with it for a long time (positive persistence)? How relentless or stubborn is she when she wants something (negative persistence)?
- (f) Sensory threshold: How does the child react to sensory stimuli: noise, bright lights, colors, smells, pain, warm weather, tastes, the texture and feel of clothes?
- (g) Approach/withdrawal: What is the child's initial response to newness - new places, people, foods, clothes?
- (h) Adaptability: How does the child deal with transition and change?
- (i) Mood: What is the child's basic disposition? Is it more sunny or more serious?

According to Turecki, by understanding these nine temperamental traits, just about any child's temperament may be classified from very easy to very difficult. Take, for example, a child's activity

## Management of Behavioral Problems in Children

level. In general, the more active he is, the more difficult he will be to manage. Naturally, the more traits which fall in the difficult end of the spectrum, the harder it becomes to raise the child.

In a general way, any child can be assessed in each area in the following manner:

TEMPERAMENTAL TRAIT	EASY	DIFFICULT
Activity level	Low	High
Distractibility	Low	High
Intensity	Low	High
Regularity	Regular	Irregular
Negative Persistence	Low	High
Sensory Threshold	High	Low
Approach/withdrawal	Approach	Withdrawal
Adaptability	Good	Poor
Mood	Positive	Negative

According to Turecki, there are many more difficult children than you might expect. Remember that the New York Longitudinal Study identified about 10% of the normal children which they studied as difficult and the authors did not include high activity level, distractibility, negative persistence, and low sensory threshold in their definition of a difficult child. If one estimates conservatively, he adds, another 10% at least would be classified as difficult because of these characteristics. Thus, we arrive at a rough estimate that approximately 20% of children under the age of 6 years are in fact temperamentally difficult and challenging to raise. Extrapolating this based on current census figures would suggest that as much as three to four million young children in this country are difficult.

**Etiology of a difficult temperament:** To date no one has determined the exact cause of temperament. Below are some of the posited causes or correlates:

**Genetics:** Most of us would agree that there is a genetic component to temperament. In fact, research on identical twins supports the conclusion that inheritance plays a role, although we cannot say there is a direct transmittal of each and every characteristic from parent to child. It is also now clear that there is a biological component to many personality traits. Genetic influences, brain chemistry, and neurological development contribute

## Management of Behavioral Problems in Children

significantly to who we are as children and later what we become as adults.

Pregnancy: The role of factors during pregnancy is not clear, although active children, particularly those diagnosed as having attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), have a greater incidence of pregnancy and delivery complications. Additionally, there is a higher incidence of high activity level in boys than in girls.

Allergies: A certain number of difficult infants are allergic to milk. Later on they tend to have more ear and throat infections. Some parents have even noted a correlation between episodes of particularly difficult behavior and eating certain foods. However, research has not clearly supported this. In fact, most research refutes the link, especially the ADHD literature.

Uneven neurological development: While most children do not always mature evenly, difficult children seem to be even more uneven. Impulse control, which depends in part, on the maturation of certain regions of the central nervous system, is often poor in highly active difficult children. Irregular sleep rhythms, late development of bladder control, and delayed language and learning skills which have been linked, in many cases, to neurological development are not at all uncommon in many difficult children.

Regardless of the postulated cause, it is important that parents not become obsessed with a possible never ending search. What is more important is that parents accept that there is no evidence which indicates that the way a child is parented causes a difficult temperament, although poor parenting can clearly worsen the behavior of a temperamentally challenging child.

In determining whether behavior is actually a function of temperament, it is important to remember that temperament manifests itself at a very early age and is part of the child rather than a response to something externally outside of him. Therefore, a child is not temperamentally difficult if he becomes difficult, for example, at ages 24 to 36 months. Rather, this may be more a function of the so called "terrible two's." Moreover, behavior difficulties which have developed recently in response to recent events such as a move or a new sibling are similarly not a function of temperament. Finally, behavioral difficulties might be a function of a clearly diagnosable mental or neurological disorder such as autism or childhood depression.

## Management of Behavioral Problems in Children

**Goodness of fit:** Though some children would be difficult for any parent, problems most typically occur when there is a poor fit, or incompatibility, between the child's temperament and the expectations of parents or others in his environment (Turecki & Wernick, 1991). Elaborating on the goodness of fit concept of Chess and Thomas, Turecki has described two types of fit: emotional and behavioral. A good emotional fit means that the mother likes the child and that she feels comfortable with him. An example of a good emotional fit is where the mother is low-key and has a high-strung child but she is nevertheless able to enjoy the child's personality. A "behavioral fit" involves how acceptable is a child's behavior to the parent. For example, an overactive child will fit much more easily into a casual home than a home in which very strict standards are established. Thus, when a child's environment is in general accord with him, you will have a good behavioral fit. Obviously, the more difficult a child is, the more likely the possibility of a poor emotional or behavioral fit.

**The effect of difficult children on their families:** Obviously, living with a difficult child can be a source of considerable stress. Mothers, in particular, are most vulnerable to the stress of raising a difficult child by virtue of being, more often than not, the child's primary caretaker. In fact, these children have been described as "mother killers" by Turecki. Common reactions of mothers include bewilderment, exhaustion, anger, guilt, embarrassment, inadequacy, depression, isolation, victimization, lack of satisfaction, and feeling trapped. Additionally, the child's difficult temperament often creates what Turecki describes as a "ripple effect" which impacts on virtually every other member of the family. Emotionally drained mothers may have no energy left over for their husbands and resultantly fathers may feel left out. Fathers, who typically have less conflict with these types of children because they are around them less, often question what the mother is doing which further erodes her already shaky self-esteem. Siblings are often resentful and even jealous of all the extra attention that their difficult brother or sister is commanding from their parents. Additionally, many siblings express a great deal of worry about the problem child. Finally, some siblings, in order to get their fair share of attention, may even act-out intentionally while others will attempt to become the perfect role-model. This latter adjustment strategy is further reinforced by some parents who exaggerate their expectations on the other children, making increased demands for independence and maturity.

### Temperamental Behavior Management and Discipline

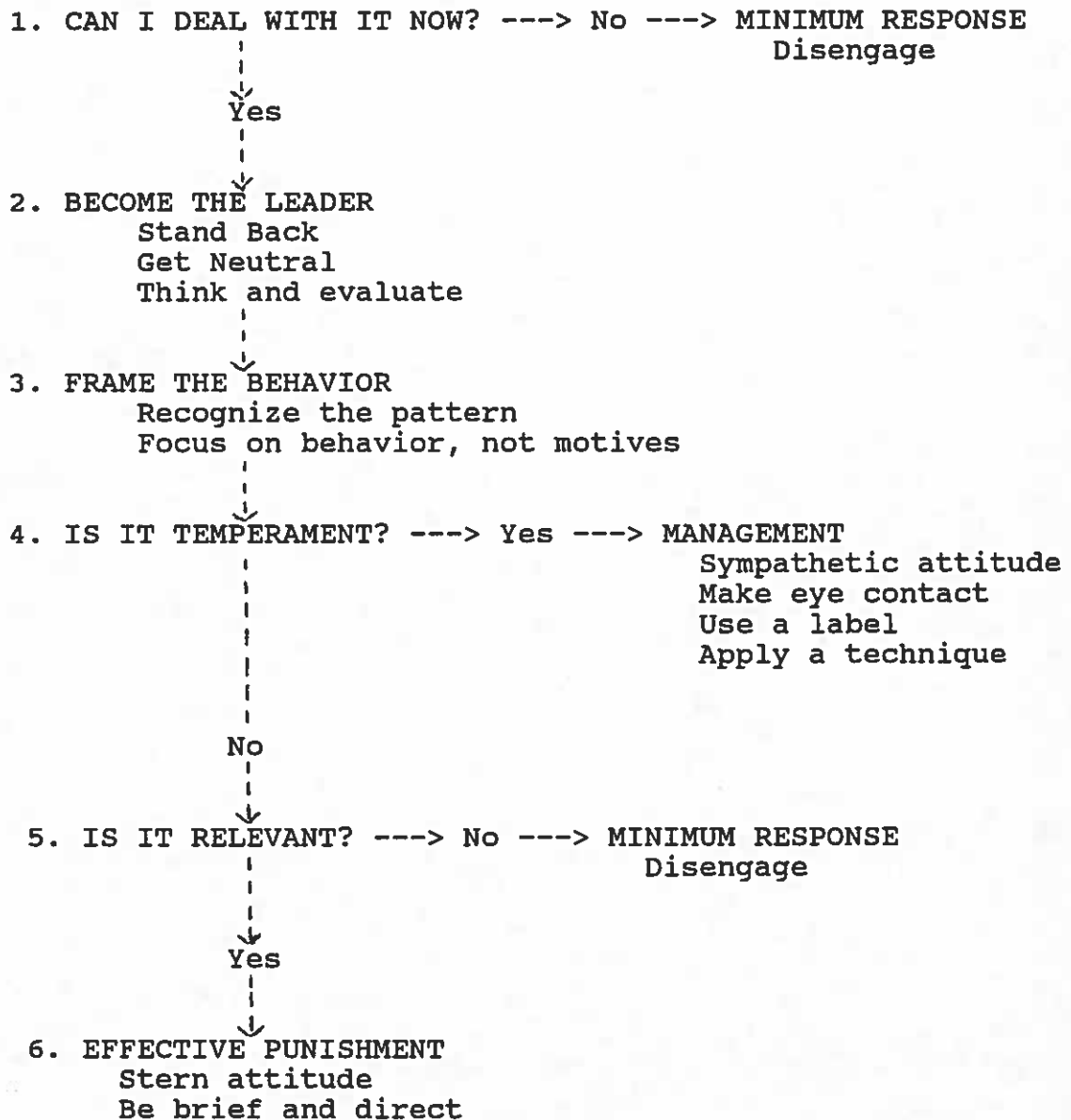
Before a parent can begin to get a handle on a child's problem behavior, she must first determine his temperamental profile. (see Appendix A). Once the parent has established the temperamental profile of the child, the next task is to establish whether the problem behavior in question is function of a difficult temperamental trait. Any time that a parent can link

## Management of Behavioral Problems in Children

the child's behavior to a difficult temperamental trait, that behavior becomes less puzzling. Behavior that is found to be the result of temperament should be managed, not punished. Remember, temperament is thought to be a function of inborn traits and, as such, is not intentional. To punish behavior which is linked to temperament is ineffective and can do harm to the child in terms of diminished self-esteem. Punishment, on the other hand, should be reserved for what Dobson (1988) terms "willful disobedience."

Turecki has expanded on this model and describes an excellent decision tree for parents which is presented below:

### PROBLEM BEHAVIOR



## Management of Behavioral Problems in Children

The above decision tree brings home several important points in dealing with difficult behavior. First (step 1) don't deal with a difficult behavior if you are not in a position to follow-through correctly. Addressing problem when you don't have the time, place, or energy increases the likelihood of inappropriate discipline or even abuse in some cases. Second, take charge of the situation, try to clam yourself down, taking a more neutral position, rather than being totally emotionally charged which only clouds thinking (step 2). Third, when possible, try to determine if there is a pattern to the behavior in question. Very importantly, avoid playing Dr. Spock and getting into attributing motives to the child's behavior, an action which usually misses the target and often only increases the anger level of the parent. Fourth, as mentioned earlier, try to determine if the behavior is a function of a difficult temperamental trait (step 4). If it is, you will want to try to manage it by sound management bypass techniques, hopefully one that has been previously thought through. In implementing this technique, try to convey a confident sympathetic attitude by labeling the behavior (without lecturing) and simply implementing the technique. Very importantly, many of these techniques can be implemented before the temperamental behavior escalates. The key word here is prevention or working around the problem temperamental behavior. Fifth, if, on the other hand, the behavior is not a function temperament, you must first determine whether it is relevant (step 5). In dealing with children it is important that a parent choose his battles carefully for, clearly, some battles are just not really worth fighting. Sixth and finally, if the problem behavior is not a function of behavior and is determined to be relevant, be firm, direct, and in control and implement a brief punishment designed to extinguish the problem behavior (step 6).

### Some examples:

The Reluctant Dresser: An example of challenging behavior resultant of temperament in the Hansen household used to occur almost every time then 3 year-old Ashley got dressed. Ashley would complain of "plumps" in her socks after we had expended considerable effort lacing up her tennis shoes. She would escalate to the point of tears requiring us to take her shoes off, straighten out the "plumps". After 3 or 4 repetitions of redoing her socks, we would become angry thinking Ashley was just being oppositional and intentionally difficult and then Ashley would really disintegrate into tears. Once we realized that Ashley's difficulty here was really a function of a temperamental problem with low sensory threshold, we changed our approach. Instead of becoming angry with her, we would tell her that we would redo her socks and shoes only 2 times. After that, although we sympathized with her discomfort, she would have to wear them regardless. We also began to

## Management of Behavioral Problems in Children

buy velcro shoes so she could remedy the problems herself. Because we learned to manage her temperamental behavior instead of punishing it, everybody won.

I won't go!: Additionally, Ashley used to have considerable difficulty transitioning from one activity to another (poor adaptability) and if transitioned too abruptly, would escalate to a tantrum. We greatly reduced the frequency of this behavior by giving her a warning of the upcoming transition telling her, for example, that when the timer goes off (usually five minutes) it will be time for her to stop playing and get in the car so we can go shopping. This simple procedure gave Ashley the time to prepare for the change and thus we were able to creatively work around her poor adaptability.

**Effective rewards:** One of the best behavioral management techniques is rewarding the child for desirable behavior as opposed to punishment (to be discussed later) which serves to extinguish undesirable behavior. Although some parents see rewarding a child as bribing, I would suggest that there is a difference between a bribe and a reward. A bribe is what the parent does to get the kid off his back. That is, he feels pressured by the child and says something like, "If you just stop screaming, I'll buy you a candy bar." Bribes spoil children and help to turn them into monsters or even family terrorists. Rewards, on the other hand, are not given to bribe children to stop doing undesirable behavior but rather are given to the child in response to positive behavior before the undesirable behavior even begins. Described below is a particularly effective reward program called the Token Economy which can be tailored to teach children almost any positive behavior (Patterson, 1975).

### The Token Economy:

1. It is often useful to utilize a reward system based on the distribution of tokens (e.g., poker chips, stars, points) contingent on desired behaviors. Children typically have the opportunity to earn tokens throughout the school day and later exchange them for desired privileges, activities, or tangible objects (e.g., a small toy). These backup rewards each cost a certain number of tokens, the number of which is agreed on beforehand. A token reward system is most effective if utilized along with parental attention and praise for appropriate behaviors.
2. Tangible tokens, such as poker chips, work best for younger children (ages 4-7 years), while points, numbers, or checks on a card can be used with older children (through high school). These tokens can later be traded in for backup rewards.



## Management of Behavioral Problems in Children

3. Backup rewards must be sufficiently interesting to the child to provide an incentive for appropriate behavior. This is easier to arrange if the child has had some say-so in choosing what the backup rewards will be. In most cases having a list of about 10 backup rewards is helpful (see Appendix A). As a general rule, about half of the backup rewards should be inexpensive (e.g., staying up an extra 1/2 hour before bedtime might cost the child 5 tokens) and the other half have greater value (e.g., a trip to McDonalds might cost 15 tokens). Some children, however, will not want a menu of backup rewards but would rather work toward one big reward. In young children especially it is important to use a visual means of recording progress. For example, a girl who wants to earn a Barbie doll might draw a picture of the doll. The parents can then section the drawing of the doll into quadrants and each time the child earns a token she can color in a section. When the picture is completely colored in, then the child gets the backup reward.

4. Rewards must be delivered frequently and promptly and must be valued by the child.

5. REWARDS MUST BE CHANGED OR ROTATED MORE FREQUENTLY FOR YOUNGER THAN FOR OLDER CHILDREN. This is due to the tendency of YOUNGER children to quickly habituate to rewards and punishments. Just remember that whatever you are now doing to motivate the child, it will undoubtedly lose its effectiveness quickly so you will need to have a number of alternate rewards available.

6. When targeting poor school performance, the teacher can provide the tokens. The total is then recorded at the end of the day on a card which the child takes home to the parent who provides backup rewards. If the child fails to bring the report home, or fails to get any needed teacher signatures, then he fails to earn any points or tokens for that day.

7. Remember that you must set priorities for which behaviors to target since the child (nor the parent) cannot work on everything at once. Address important behaviors which are attainable to promote early success.

**Effective punishment:**

As previously stated, not all problem behavior is a function of a difficult temperament and punishment strategies will therefore have to be implemented from time to time. One of the most effective techniques to help extinguish problem behavior is time-out and is outlined below (Barkley, 1990):

Guidelines for Time-Out (TO)

- (1) To reduce negative behavior.
- (2) Effective for ages 2 to 12.
- (3) Choose a TO location where there are no available reinforcers (e.g. TV, people nearby, toys, etc.).
- (4) Explain rules of TO before it is implemented.
- (5) Give child one warning, if no response, child goes to TO.
- (6) Without yelling or lecturing, tell child why he is being sent to time out.
- (7) Set timer (approximately one minute per year, never more than 10 minutes).
- (8) If child is noisy or gets up, add one minute.
- (9) Child may not leave TO until he is quiet and buzzer goes off.
- (10) Give child praise for doing something good shortly after the TO has been completed to remove any negative mind-set.

Although I do not personally advocate spanking to parents and instead recommend alternative strategies whenever possible (e.g, time-out), I nevertheless appreciate that many parents' philosophical or religious orientations hold spanking as an essential and viable discipline technique. I preface guidelines for spanking by suggesting that spanking is not for all children nor is it for all parents. Some very temperamentally fragile children can even be emotionally damaged by it and some very hostile or aggressive children can be moved toward further aggression by the use of spanking. Finally, some parents are far too angry themselves and can easily lose control when spanking, even to the point of abuse.

Guidelines for spanking

- (1) For acts of willful disobedience only.

## Management of Behavioral Problems in Children

- (2) Ensure that your child understands the reason.
- (3) Three spans maximum on bottom with open hand or flat object.
- (4) Do not spank if you are not in control of your anger.
- (5) Only effective if relatively immediate to undesirable behavior.
- (6) Give plenty of love and reassurance after spanking.
- (7) No spanking after age 8 or 9.

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APPENDIX I

**Do You Have a Difficult Child?**

- FAMILY QUESTIONS**                      Answer "YES" or "NO"
1. Do you find your child hard to raise?
  2. Do you find the child's behavior hard to understand?
  3. Are you often battling the child?
  4. Do you feel inadequate or guilty as a parent?
  5. Is your marriage or family life being affected by the child?

**CHILD QUESTIONS**

The headings below identify possibly difficult areas of your child's temperament (his or her basic makeup). Rate your child, in an overall way, on each item, using this scale:

- 0 = No problem
- 1 = Moderate problem
- 2 = Definite problem
- 3 = Extreme problem

**High Activity Level**  
 Very active, restless, fidgety; always into things; makes you tired; "ran before he walked"; easily overstimulated; gets wild or "revved up"; impulsive, loses control, can be aggressive; hates to be confined.                     

**Dist. scibility**  
 Has trouble concentrating and paying attention, especially if not really interested; doesn't "listen"; tunes you out; daydreams; forgets instructions.                     

**High Intensity**  
 Loud and forceful whether miserable, angry, or happy.                     

**Irregularity**  
 Unpredictable. Can't tell when he'll be hungry or tired; conflict over meals and bedtime; wakes up at night; moods are changeable; has good or bad days for no obvious reason.                     

**Negative Persistence**  
 Stubborn; goes on and on nagging, whining, or negotiating if wants something; relentless, won't give up; gets "locked in"; may have long tantrums.                     

**Low Sensory Threshold**  
 "Sensitive"—physically not emotionally; highly aware of color, light, appearance, texture, sound, smell, taste, or temperature (not necessarily all of these); "creative," but with strong and unusual preferences that can be embarrassing; clothes have to feel and look right, making dressing a problem; doesn't like the way many foods look, smell, or taste; picky eater; bothered and overstimulated by bright lights and noisy settings; refuses to dress warmly when the weather is cold.                     

**Initial Withdrawal**  
 Shy and reserved with new people; doesn't like new situations; holds back or protests by crying or clinging; may tantrum if forced to go forward.                     

**Poor Adaptability**  
 Has trouble with transition and change of activity or routine; inflexible, very particular, notices minor changes; gets used to things and won't give them up; has trouble adapting to anything unfamiliar; can want the same clothes or foods over and over.                     

**Negative Mood**  
 Basically serious or cranky; doesn't show pleasure openly; not a "sunny" disposition.                     

**What Your Rating Means**

FAMILY "YES"	CHILD	CONCLUSION
0-1	+ 3-6 points	= Some difficult features
2-3	+ 8-12 points	= Difficult child
4-5	+ 13 or more points	= Very difficult child