



Photograph by Bonnie Neugebauer

# Responding Professionally and Compassionately to Challenging Behavior

by Karen Stephens



It's around 3 PM. It's been a long day. I'm tired, the kids are rambunctious. Why not? They're energized from nap! (When will we adults ever learn to join in?)

It's a typical "making the transition to snack time" afternoon. Even the telephone rings on cue to complete the cacophony. It's the editor of this fine magazine, "Karen, tell me about difficult kids." Instant reaction: "I'll fax you first and last names in five minutes."

No, I'd never break confidentiality rules by divulging names! But my point is, I could name names. And when I conferred with our teaching staff about difficult children, we came up with the very same names!

There are children who are so challenging of our every decision, so demanding of emotional reserves and physical stamina, so intent on testing our commitment to consistency, that they leave a very vivid impression . . . for life . . . or at least a career.

If you've been to even one self-esteem or positive discipline workshop, you know the dangers of labeling kids. They live up to the labels we bestow! Research (and common sense) warns us of the pitfalls of name calling. Most teachers avoid pigeon-holing children with unflattering and stereotypical adjectives. We've struck most "isms" from our language. But there's a descriptor still politically correct among early childhood professionals: "The difficult child."

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We haven't eradicated that phrase from staff meetings, late night discussion with family members, co-worker parties, or even parent conferences. With one scathing word, "difficult," we sum up a child's past, current, and future personality and behavior as if it has little hope of refinement or redefinition.

The frustrating thing about this is the word is just so useful! Entering the break room, a teacher puts hand to forehead and laments (her voice reeking of exasperation): "Tony is *such* a difficult child. . . ." Instant commiseration pours out to her. Every teacher in the room knows *exactly* what she's talking about.

I'm ashamed I still find the descriptor on the tip of my tongue. You know, when a child's behavior really begins to wear on you, the label creeps into your consciousness like a chant: Difficult, difficult, difficult. Before you know it, the whole staff is hoping the parents discontinue enrollment before the child moves up to their room. But how are we to cope with children who are so hard to live with if we can't describe them honestly? And difficult is often the most honest descriptor!

### Research Sheds Light on Temperament

Since the 1960s, research has shown that, from birth, each of us has a basic temperament. That means each of us is **born** with a predisposed way of responding to physical environment, events, and interactions with others. The style of responding tends to remain stable throughout life.

Researchers (most notably Stella Chase and Alexander Thomas) identified three basic temperaments: easy, slow to warm up, and difficult (with variations in each of the three broad categories).

Temperaments are determined by analyzing children's typical behavior related to: activity level, predictable biological schedules (rhythmicity), responses to novelty and change (approach/withdrawal), adaptability, intensity of reaction, sensitivity to stimuli (responsiveness threshold), mood, attention span, and distractibility.

Within each category, there is a continuum or gradation of behaviors. For instance, in terms of activity level, children may be very active, mildly active, or extremely passive. As you might guess, children of "easy" temperament fall at one end of the continuum. "Difficult" children fall at the extreme other end.

It's important to remember that children do not "choose" temperament, and parents don't bestow temperament by way of child-rearing. A better way to

think of it is that we all react to children's innate temperament. We influence how they cope with their own temperament, but children are not taught or "given" temperament.

Temperament is a function of biological development. It is affected by random organization of genes, chemicals, and hormones. It is also affected by prenatal exposure to drugs, such as cocaine and alcohol (since drugs ingested by the mother affect the development of the nervous system of the fetus).

### Characteristics of Temperamentally Difficult Children

So, parents have been proven correct. Siblings born to the same parents, reared in very similar ways, can still be — in terms of behavior and personality — as different as night and day. Temperament at least partially explains this phenomena.

Temperament doesn't make a child good or bad. It just influences a child's particular style of approaching the world. The challenge for teachers is to recognize children's unique temperament characteristics, and then find ways to cope and respond to them *constructively*. The degree to which the teacher achieves this will affect the quality of teacher-child relationships and interactions. It will also influence children's self-esteem and mastery of positive social skills.

Following are characteristics associated with temperamentally difficult children. They are important to be aware of so you can better analyze classroom incidents and why they occur. But, of equal value, being aware of these characteristics will help you respond to children's behavior with compassion rather than disdain and resentment.

- **High activity levels.** These children MOVE . . . a lot! They are often loud. It's hard for them to control impulses in group time. Active play can escalate out of a child's control.
- **Easily overstimulated.** They have intense reactions to sensations. They're hesitant about tasting new foods. Loud, unexpected sounds and color overwhelm them. Intense or prolonged eye contact causes them to withdraw, resist, or move away. They may enjoy cuddling, but not for long or intense periods. Some children have strong preferences (and dislikes!) for varying fabrics of clothing. (A five year old girl once cried all day because her corduroy dress "just didn't feeeeeel right." Oh, and she hated it because it was plaid. I had to coax her into the classroom amidst



her repeated wail: “My mom made me wear this ugly dress!!!”)

- **Overwhelmed by change and novelty.** They’re easily caught off guard by changes in schedules and routines. Field trips and special visitors can throw them into a tizzy! Parents visiting the classroom confuse and bewilder them. Fire drills ruin their day. You get the idea.

- **Decisive, adamant, and intense reactions.** These children don’t just have opinions, ideas, or “druthers.” They know what they want, and they want it NOW! They can be incredibly persistent and single-minded. It’s very hard for them to take anyone else’s perspective.

- **Easily distracted OR incredibly focused.** These children may need a lot of reminders to stay on task. They bore easily. Their focus can be diverted from activities by something as simple as a fly or a stain spied on another child’s shoe. However, when something grabs their attention, they can tune everything (and everyone!) out and become oblivious to regular routines. Thus, they require many reminders of what is going on around them.

- **Adapt slowly to change.** Transitions that are not smooth and predictable throw them off schedule *for the whole day*. They don’t ease back into routines after playing outside. It’s very hard for them to shift gears from active play to quiet play. They are very wary of new caregivers, volunteers, and children. They have a hard time calming themselves after active play, parent separations, temper tantrums, or tears.

- **Irregular biological rhythms and schedules.** Hunger fluctuates day to day, so they often don’t want to eat during regular meal times. Digestion can be a problem. Potty training can be difficult due to irregular bowel patterns. Nap time can be a challenge because sleep is hard to achieve as well as maintain.

- **Rapid, sometimes intense, mood swings.** Triggers for mood swings are often hard to identify. A child may be laughing one minute and in a violent temper tantrum the next. Anger flares up and quickly becomes uncontrollable. Frustration often leaves these children literally curled up in a ball on the floor with tears flowing.

## Implications for Teachers

**Facing the facts of life in child care.** Yes, it’s true. Temperamentally difficult children pose unique challenges, especially in a group setting. Let’s face it, child care is stimulating in terms of peers and materials. Current staff turnover rates don’t



Photograph by Bonnie Neugebauer

bode well for consistency. Children who are extremely sensitive to noise, color, and social interactions may do better in a very small center, a day care home, or with an in-home nanny.

**Confronting childhood stresses.** By being aware of and sensitive to the stresses endured by your students, you’ll find it easier to be compassionate with them. A child care center with predictable, well-balanced activities and routines can be a haven for all children, but especially children who struggle with life’s harder issues.

And as you show compassion for the children, I hope you save some for yourself as well. There are many times when you’ll feel like a failure when dealing with challenging children. But remember, even when you are successful in creating a stable, secure, and comforting classroom environment, this may not be the case in children’s homes.

Even the best of teachers or the best of child care centers cannot make up for a home environment that is chaotic, experiencing pangs of poverty, struggling with the anxiety of separation and divorce, ridden with domestic or neighborhood violence, or tainted by substance abuse. Homes such as these are especially difficult for challenging children to thrive in. In a very real sense, teachers experience the fall-out of such conditions when children enter their classroom each day.

**Facing ourselves.** Difficult children test the true character of teachers. When a teacher is tired, or overwhelmed by group size, it’s easy to take difficult children’s



## Responding to Spirited Children

With the hopes of bringing out the best in ALL children, here are some tips for responding to the spirited children who grace your classroom with their energy.

- Maintain a predictable daily schedule. Privately warn children of changes in routine.
- Give children simple, step-by-step directions when guiding them through activities or routines.
- Because these children get overwhelmed when given too many choices, limit the number of activities offered at one time in one area. Limit the number of choices during a particular activity. (Needless to say, this is very hard to do while still allowing other children to have choices they are able to handle!)
- Work in small groups as much as possible. Make a concerted effort to make your classroom less overwhelming and stimulating. Rotate toys and materials. Leave more white space on walls. Keep noise and voice levels steady.
- Make sure all activities are developmentally appropriate. Successful experiences with hands-on materials is especially important for these children.
- If children begin losing control or being overwhelmed, provide more structure. This can be achieved by offering fewer choices and providing more specific directions to follow. While some children flourish with creativity when offered open-ended activities, these children may flounder. It takes a wise teacher to make the distinction.
- Document problematic behaviors in a daily log. Analyze log entries. Can you identify what triggers antisocial behavior such as hitting, kicking, or tantrums? Can the classroom be modified to eliminate or reduce the triggers?
- Create cozy, secluded corners (inside and outside) so children can remove themselves when necessary from the overstimulation of group living.
- Become skilled in managing smooth transitions between activities.
- Rehearse any changes that can be anticipated. For instance, before a field trip, role play procedures that will be followed.
- Include movement in activities whenever possible. Make sure movement opportunities are scheduled throughout the day.
- Be respectful of children's preferences in terms of tastes, textures, etc. There's no sense in forcing a child to eat an egg salad sandwich if it is only going to come up in two seconds. Don't force a child to put his hands in water, play dough, or sand if he vehemently dislikes the texture. With time and gradual exposure, the child will learn to adjust to and enjoy sensory variations. This requires teachers to be patient.
- Coach children toward self-control. Every child can be impulsive, but especially spirited children. Teaching them self-discipline is imperative. Helping them master language for expression of feelings and desires will help them gain positive social skills. Positive discipline techniques must be consistently applied.
- Choose your battles wisely. Avoid power struggles. When disciplining, use clear direction and enforce limits with reasonable, related, and respectful consequences. Avoid overreacting, raising your voice, and issuing ultimatums. Deal with behavior problems calmly and matter of factly. This will help the child gain control and trust in your support and guidance.
- Hold frequent parent conferences to coordinate classroom practices with home practices. Parents can often give teachers helpful hints for dealing with children's behavior and visa versa.
- Focus on the child's strengths. Look for the positive. Comment on adaptive, admirable behaviors and traits so you are an uplifting influence. Name calling and labeling children as "troublemakers" make you an accomplice to creating a child's negative self-image. I'm sure that's not the legacy you want to leave children.
- When YOU become overwhelmed and drained, seek the counsel of a supportive friend or co-worker. Finding someone you trust who will just listen can give you the release you need to face the next day with an optimistic attitude.

behavior personally. It takes patience, discipline, and professionalism to rise above holding grudges against children who aren't "easy" through no fault of their own.

Remember that each of us is born with a temperament which lasts throughout life. Teachers must take time for self-reflection to determine how their own temperament

is affecting their relationship with their "difficult" student.

In an ideal world, difficult children would only be assigned to "easy" teachers who are temperamentally blessed by nature with endless patience and adaptability. But, in reality, teachers



who have trouble coping with change are caring for children with the very same challenge. This highlights the need for teachers to be self-aware, objective, and analytical. Is the child the source of classroom conflict, or is it the teacher?

For a teacher, facing oneself with brutal honesty is often the biggest challenge of all! But it's often the secret to solving classroom behavior problems.

**Being ethical.** Professionals must resist the urge to “gossip” about challenging children. Whether in staff meetings or at the local pub, concerns about children's behavior should focus on problem solving. It should be geared to establishing goals for a child's continued development (as well as our own). Discussion should focus on positive expectations, rather than exacerbating a problem by letting staff's frustration fester beyond reasonable bounds.

The urge to “warn” substitutes, aides, or volunteers about children's inappropriate behavior conveys a defeatist attitude. A more ethical approach is to share tips for helping *each child* cope most easily within the classroom setting. After all, each is an individual. Each, regardless of temperament, has “challenging” moments. You can help substitutes have successful days in your classroom by telling the *what works* with children, rather than focusing on how the children, especially the challenging ones, “don't work.”

**Focus on partnerships with parents.** “Sometimes I just want to rush in here and tell you what a wonderful person Juanita can be.” Thus pleaded a parent we were conferring with on a daily basis about her child's behavior.

It was obvious she was tired of hearing about problems. It was our cue to reassure her that we, too, thought her child was a wonderful person — a person we could celebrate as part of our classroom.

In future parent discussions, we focused more on Juanita's positive behavior. But, at the same time, we continued talking about new ways to help her learn more constructive social skills. We shared books and articles with the parent. We referred her to local parent workshops.

Most importantly, we listened to her perceptions of her child's behavior, and its possible causes. After all, parents are the most important people in children's lives. Often, but not always, they can be very objective and insightful when dealing with a topic as important as their child's development.

## Dealing Constructively with Difficult Behavior

*Raising Your Spirited Child* by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka helped me rethink children with challenging behaviors. Being an early childhood teacher and a mother of a “difficult” child herself, she has a lot of credibility.

To focus on the strengths and positive aspects of “difficult” temperament, she coined the term “spirited child.” She urges us not to negatively categorize children simply because their nature is more intense. She reminds us that children who are vocal and adamant may someday be great defense lawyers. The ability to tune out all but one thought may ultimately serve a child well who aspires to be a scientist or competitive athlete.

Yes, I think she thought up a wonderful phrase to replace “difficult child” in our vocabulary. A spunky, spirited child doesn't fit into a classroom as seamlessly as a laid-back, go-with-the-flow “easy temperament” child. But you have to admit, they bring a lot of spice to life. By helping them make the most of their unique characteristics, we also nurture professional growth in ourselves. The compassion we extend to these children today will influence the quality of their lives into the future.

## Recommended Resources

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