

## You to the Rescue

### ***How Parents can Help their Temperamentally Challenging Children Improve their Coping Skills***

Parents of easy going children can successfully implement a variety of parenting techniques. That's not the case when it comes to parenting temperamentally challenging children. If your child is especially active, especially intense, especially sensitive, especially low in frustration tolerance or especially low in adaptability fine tuning your understanding of your child and choosing parenting responses that are a good fit with your child is a vital part of making day to day life easier and helping your child learn to understand and appropriately manage their temperament.

Parents spend way more time with their children than any therapist does. You can be helpful to your child all week by long utilizing the following techniques.

**Temperament is the *how* of behavior rather than the *why*. It's the style or way someone does what they do. There are advantages and disadvantages to all varieties of temperament. There is no such thing as an abnormal temperament.**

1. You must come first. Just like the instructions for an emergency in a plane if you have a child with you, you need to put your own oxygen mask on first. You can't do this running on empty. Make sure you are taking good care of yourself.
2. Even when things aren't going well, *especially* when things aren't going well, you need to have good times with your child. Go out for lunch or ice cream. Find something to laugh about together. You each need to remember and experience positive things about each other and your relationship. You can draw from that 'bank' during tough times. It will help you and your child to be a little more flexible, have a sense of humor and give each other the benefit of the doubt.
3. Always consider the context in which your child's behavior is occurring. Behaviors can seem a lot more worrisome when taken out of context. You may not want a current behavior to continue but it may make sense that it is occurring when you take into account such factors as any changes or stress your child is experiencing, fatigue, and over-

stimulation. When there are reasons contributing to a behavior problem there are clear opportunities for improvement.

4. The secret to better behavior is through planning ahead and making sure your child gets extra skill building and support. *It is not enough to have a talk about appropriate behaviors!* Just because they know better doesn't mean they are able to do better. The youngest of children know what behaviors are expected of them and will promise at a neutral time not to repeat inappropriate behaviors. It is not simply bad manners when a child promises better behavior and continues with inappropriate behavior. Just as some children know they are expected to read and yet struggle and need extra support, some children require extra support to learn how to behave better. Taking something away from a child or using some other form of punishment does not help a child to learn a skill they need.
5. Make a plan with your child about how to handle situations that may be difficult for him or her. Walk through your plan using one or more indirect approaches that work well with your child. Use stories, made up or in a book, talk about children you've observed somewhere in public or in a movie or TV show, use dolls, puppets or characters or act out the situation playfully. Keep the time short and pleasant. Your child may assure you that they will utilize the new plan next time (when they don't want to go to bed, when homework is difficult, etc) but advise them that might be tricky and play out all the possibilities. This is an opportunity for your child to learn problem solving skills so let them make inappropriate choices now ("I could rip up my homework") without correction. "You could, I imagine you might really want to. I wonder what would happen if you did?" This also reduces the novelty (which is challenging for low adapting children) of a situation by creating and running through a plan and various scenarios. Change is hard, particularly for low adapting children. The more familiar a plan is the more likely a child will be to manage it in a stressful situation.
6. Negative reactions to new situations, instructions and transitions are often a sign that a child is having trouble coping. Resistance *is* a coping skill. It helps children to try and minimize the amount of change they have to handle. A direct sit down, sit still, look at me, what are you feeling, why did you do it approach is overrated. Children often say, "I don't know" because they don't know why they did it or what they feel. Utilizing an indirect or back door approach will increase their comfort and thus their compliance. Talk to the air, the wall or the ceiling. Speculate on what they might be feeling to help them become aware of their feelings. They can add to or modify your speculations if they want but you aren't putting them on the hot seat and they don't have to respond. You are helping to increase self awareness, letting your child know that you are trying to understand them and that

they can talk with you about this if they want. If you see a positive change in their behavior you can be sure you were on the right track.

7. Offering two finite choices is another way to share control with low adapting children that works well for both parents and children. If a child wants a third choice be sympathetic to their feelings but stick with your two choices.
8. DO NOT try to negotiate, explain, reason or instruct a child who is upset. It goes nowhere good for parent or child. Parents get upset when they are trying so hard to be calm and reasonable and their child is having none of it. Your child is too overloaded to take anything else in. Unless there is an immediate safety issue your first response should be to support your child's feelings. You don't have to agree with how they feel or understand why they are so upset you simply have to support their feelings with sincerity. You want to give your child the messages that feelings, whatever they are don't get you in trouble. Behaviors can get you in trouble and you want to separate the two. This is likely to deescalate the situation and up compliance, "You look really mad, or, I know how much you hate to brush your teeth or, Wow. You sound really frustrated." A sentence or two is often enough. If not you might get more dramatic and offer that you bet if it were up to your child she'd never have to go to bed, never have to do homework, etc.(and keep up with that line for a bit). Be sure your comments are heartfelt and that you don't move right into what a child can or can't so that you undermine your support of their feelings.
9. You cannot teach flexibility with inflexibility or de-escalation with escalation. When your buttons are being pushed and you want to pull the, "I'm the adult" card take care of yourself. Announce that you need a break and need some time out, time outside, to turn on some loud music and let loose, a hug or whatever might help and also model good self care.
10. Sometimes the best you can do is get through a difficult situation. Once every one has calmed down you can use that tough time to plan a way to avoid a repeat. "That was too hard for me! And it didn't look very fun for you. I think we need a new plan." Is a good lead in. Children will usually be amenable to this as you are not telling them they are bad or in trouble, it wasn't fun for them, and, low adapting kids like plans.
11. A "do over" is a face saving way to help turn things around. When you or your child start to go down a road you know is going nowhere good, model flexibility by catching yourself. Suggest that one or the other of you walk out the door and begin again or shake things off. Be light, dramatic and humorous to help invoke flexibility rather than a power struggle.
12. Think of responding to your child *effectively* rather than needing a bigger and bigger response. If your response is effective you shouldn't have to work so hard at it.

13. Be careful about assuming intent. If you assume a negative intent on your child's part, "She's not even trying, He's so mean", etc, that will affect your response. Ask yourself what you are basing your information on and try to assume at least a neutral intent, "This is a tough situation for her, He's doing the best he can" which will help you to respond appropriately.
14. Change starts with you. You can't *make* your child, or anyone else for that matter, change. Parenting your temperamentally challenging requires a lot more from you than parenting an easier going child and you may need to periodically let off some steam about that. If you wait for your child to change you are giving your control away. Changing the way you think about your child's behavior and how you respond to her or him will make daily life a lot easier for both your child and for you.
15. Temperamentally challenging children often hear or deduce that they are in trouble, bad, or different, not useful information. Give them neutral observations about their temperament, "I've noticed that you have a hard time with changes but that they get easier for you when you get used to them. I've noticed that you get grumpy when we're in loud or busy places." This is useful information and will help them learn to understand and manage their temperament.
16. Prioritize your concerns so that you are working on manageable goals. Parents get overloaded when they do try too many new things at once and get tired or forget, then when the new plans aren't working it's easy to get discouraged. Better to work on 1 or 2 things at once that both parents and low adapting children can manage.
17. When you don't attend to all of your concerns you are not letting your child get away with things. You are helping them to be successful. It will be easier for everyone to work on other concerns when there have been successes.
18. It's easy, and discouraging to come up with a list of complaints. Pay attention to the times that go well. What ingredients went into those times that you could plan to repeat?
19. Think of your goal not as trying to win with your children or to control them but to teach and guide them and to help them learn to manage their temperament and their behavior so that it works well for them.
20. If you are concerned that your child's behavior indicates something more serious than temperament make sure you don't skip any steps. Have you tried everything you can?

Sometimes just a break from working on things can help. What do you hope to gain from defining your child's behavior as abnormal? If there is nothing in the way of services or new information to be gained then continue to collect information. Unusual and challenging behaviors are not necessarily abnormal behaviors.

token prize for being able to pull off desired behaviors if you plan for this ahead of time. If your child doesn't earn the reward be matter of fact about it being "too hard" for him or her to behave in the agreed upon way this time, but also plant the positive seed that you're sure it will be easier next time.

4. Give your child observational feedback. "You look pretty frustrated. You're starting to throw the legos". "You sure looked mad when your brother knocked over your blocks". This kind of feedback helps your child learn to become aware of how he or she is feeling, a skill needed to avoid impulsive reactions.
5. Active and intense kids are physical. Help them notice their bodies and provide acceptable outlets. "You are getting really revved up. It looks like your body needs to be outside for awhile." "You are getting too loud and wild for the library. It looks like we need to check out our books so you can race me to the car". Rainy weather provides a challenge in this regard. Unless your child is sick some time outside stomping in puddles may be well worth it for both of you. Alternately water play in the tub or at the sink or with cardboard boxes that don't need to be handled with care are other active indoor play choices.
6. Active intense kids often get into other people's space as they barrel along. They may be oblivious to consequences such as getting in trouble or having someone get upset with them. Notice this out loud for them. Make sure your tone is neutral and observational. "You were pretty upset when I tripped over your cars and messed up the line you were setting up. And I felt kind of upset about having to fold all the laundry again after you dove into the pile of folded clothes". Once again, be sure your tone is neutral and refrain from demanding a response. You are gently nudging your child in the direction of more self awareness and empathy.
7. The use of stories about other children who are out of control, upset or angry can be a safe way for your child to learn self control and better choices. Stories can also be a safe and easy way to talk about those issues. Make sure though that you avoid lecturing. You want to inspire new awareness, not a power struggle.
8. Help your child to become aware of what kinds of things upset him or her. "It seems like it's really hard for you to wait". "It's hard for you to share your toys". Etc. This will help you and your child plan for times when your child is at greater risk of losing control.
9. Help your child to become aware of what kinds of things help him or her to calm down. Does your child like to be held or left alone? If they like to be left alone do they want to let you know when they are ready for contact or would they like you to check in with them? Water play is often very calming. That might mean a bath, standing at the sink in the house. Outside a bucket of water and paint brush to 'paint' the house or a tub of water and toys will work. Blowing bubbles can also be very calming.
10. Have your child be the advisor or helper for a stuffed animal or younger child who is having similar difficulties. This will help your child pull out that capable part of themselves.
11. Playing simple games with your child such as Candy Land, Chutes and Ladders or Go Fish will help your child to learn patience and to share control. Make sure it's a fun experience. Don't get into a power struggle about the rules. Keep the game short if your child is easily frustrated by the experience. Bring your neutral observational self to this experience too. "Darn, I got sent back." "Sometimes you get the

card you want and sometimes not.” You are helping to give your child a perspective beyond the moment. If things don’t go his or her way one time they may another time.

12. Use drama and humor to help your child let go of upsets. When your child doesn’t get the prize they wanted from a gumball machine stomp your foot and say, ‘Darn! I was hoping you’d get the one you wanted. Gumball machine, didn’t you know that Sophie really wanted the ring?’ Be sensitive about this. You are not mocking your child; you are modeling another way to react.
13. Intense children often use strong language when they are upset or excited. Make sure you are clear about which words are acceptable and which are not. You might designate an area (such as the bathroom or the child’s bedroom) where he or she can speak freely. This approach reduces the potential for a power struggle over this issue. You can utilize humor and drama again. Get silly with your child and create some acceptable words together. Be stern and no nonsense about unacceptable language. Keep your response simple, don’t lecture. There should be no secondary gain (such as how upset you get) from using unacceptable language.
14. Don’t wait for your child to get too wound up. Provide periodic physical breaks. You might have your child bring mail to the mail box out front, throw the ball for the dog for awhile (the dog needs some exercise), etc. Enlisting your child’s help gives him or her a sense of importance and the breaks will help prevent your child’s energy from escalating to the out of control point.
15. Have your child practice behaviors necessary for something they are looking forward to, preschool, kindergarten, a birthday party, a play date, etc. You might set the timer for a short period of time and suggest that your child show you how they will need to act at the upcoming event. Keep this positive and fun. If your child loses control remind him or her that this is exactly what practice is for and that there will be another chance later that day or tomorrow which is sure to be easier.
16. Minimize your child’s time watching videos, TV and playing video games, especially when there is aggressive or violent content. Children tend to be more wound after TV or video games and learn from what they are exposed to so choose wisely and talk with your child about what they are watching.
17. Involve your child in projects that develop over time. Planting seeds in a pot indoors or in the ground outside will give your child the experience of delayed gratification and the satisfaction of taking the steps (planting and watering) required for the end result.
18. Develop bedtime rituals that allow your child time to wind down so that bedtime is not a battle zone. Finding the right balance for high energy kids can be a bit tricky. They may want to go and go and go but may also get too wound up and over stimulated without enough down time.
19. When your child is getting out of control and their energy is either unfocused or headed into problem behaviors, help give them a focus. This is the time to draw hopscotch squares outside, pound some nails in a board, get out a jump rope, or do some digging outside. If they are not too revved up you can give them a box of jars and lids that have become separated. Have them match the appropriate lids to their jars.
20. Help your child get involved in activities which involve plenty of energy but also require focus and self control. Some possibilities include swim lessons, gymnastics, dance lessons and playing with older children.