

# Parenting a Difficult Child

Carrie Barron, M.D.

Some children are hardwired to disturb the peace at home or school but their unusual energies take them to high places later.

Why are some kids difficult? Is it ADHD, a creative personality, a highly sensitive nature, oppositional defiant disorder, a learning disability, a mood disorder, or a sub-clinical phenomenon? Naming a problem can be good for clarity and anxiety relief, but a diagnosis is less important than customizing a plan for each child and family.

Disruptive, demanding children can become fantastic contributors later in life. A troublemaker who takes over the classroom may become an energetic CEO. A big personality might become a media mogul. A tearful soul might become a missionary for a meaningful cause. A recluse may become an artist. Some people are not that social because they have a rich inner life. If your child hibernates all weekend maybe you do not have to worry as much as you think you do. Some kids are too social in the eyes of their parents but the stimulation they get from carousing may be the source of great success in the future. Unless there is an underlying illness, riding out the calls from the principal may be your best bet.

That said, life is hard for kids who don't comply or fit in. They may be disfavored by teachers, sitters, or family members, which can lead to self-doubt, overt punitive gestures, or subtle rejections.

"Conform" vs. "Be yourself" can be an interesting rather than torturous challenge. Have faith that small steps lead to big changes and know that kids grow out of unevenness.

In the here and now, how can you help your child protect his or her spirit and adjust to expectations so that they do not alienate authority figures or peers? Understanding and managing your own inner reactions will help you figure it out.

### **Seven Suggestions**

1. Be honest with yourself about who your child really is even if you cannot exactly figure out where they came from.
2. Accept that your personality and theirs may not have a natural harmony. That's okay. Love does not require a symbiosis or sameness. There can be a distance between you and your child.
3. Explore supports for his or her strengths. Support can come in the form of an opposite influence: If she tends to get revved up, maybe a calm friend will bring out the best in him or her.
4. Communicate about how it is going. Listen to what your child says and observe where there is a spike in emotion. This will give you a clue to the crux of the matter if they have not told you directly. Kids may not be able to articulate what is wrong, but they reveal it through behavior or affect (emotion). Being heard goes a long way; when a child feels less alone, he or she is more motivated to comply without feeling controlled.
5. Respect idiosyncrasies in your child and see how to channel them. Go with their natural gifts and characteristics. Be at peace with not doing what everyone around you is doing. Help them respect,

honor and embrace their differences.

6. Reward him or her for containing behaviors that provoke others. It could be ice cream or a toy but it could also be an interesting shared experience, like a movie or a road trip with one parent. Sharing what they like to do with them can help cement a strong identity.
7. Make your home an interesting place for your family as much as possible. Create a culture that works: strong consequences, clear rules, and a place where positive things happen, from meaningful conversations to cooked meals to friends coming over. This forms a base from which strong selves are made.

Hang in there, weather the tumult, and don't panic because they are not who you wanted them to be. Your offspring take in your values and your wisdom even if they fight you every step of the way. And one day, when they show up as someone you recognize and deeply admire, you will feel quite fine.