

Tailoring parenting to fit the child

Diana Smart

Children are often seen as the product of their environment and their parents' child rearing skills. While they are undoubtedly greatly influenced by their family environment, they come into the world with very different personalities and characteristics. Parents often notice that strategies which work with one child may not work as well with another. Bringing up children is a "two-way street" to which parents and children both contribute. This article provides an overview of evidence about the importance of synchrony between parenting methods and child characteristics, and outlines ways in which parenting can be attuned to "fit" the child.

Temperament researchers such as Rothbart and Bates (2006) highlight the large differences that exist between children on qualities such as *reactivity*—the intensity or mildness with which a child acts and reacts; *sociability*—how at ease a child is when meeting new people or in new situations; and *self-regulation*—a child's ability to control his/her attention, emotions and behaviour. More specific temperament traits (e.g. sensitivity, activity) are also often distinguished, but these can be seen as elements of the three broad aspects just described. Each child has a different mix of temperament traits and they form part of his/her innate make-up. Children's temperament traits are visible from birth and believed to be biologically based, although they can be changed to some degree by the child's later experiences.

A large body of research shows that a child's temperament style contributes to his/her wellbeing (see the review by Sanson, Hemphill, & Smart 2004). For example, shyness and/or high reactivity have been found to be risk factors for anxiety; and high reactivity and/or poor self regulation (especially of emotions but also of attention) are linked to the development of externalising problems such as aggression and oppositional behaviour. On the other hand, temperament traits such as good self regulation and a calm, easygoing style (i.e. low reactivity) are associated with the development of good social skills and prosocial capacities such as empathy. A child's temperament style can also influence other people's reactions to the child. For example, an adaptable, confident child is generally easier to interact with than an intense, shy one, which may open up more opportunities for the sunnier natured child. These personality differences can encourage the child to seek out environments in which he/she feels comfortable in (termed "niche picking" by Scarr & McCartney, 1983), potentially narrowing the child's range of experiences. Thus, a child's temperament style can exert a large influence on his/her development, and can also affect parent-child relationships and family life.



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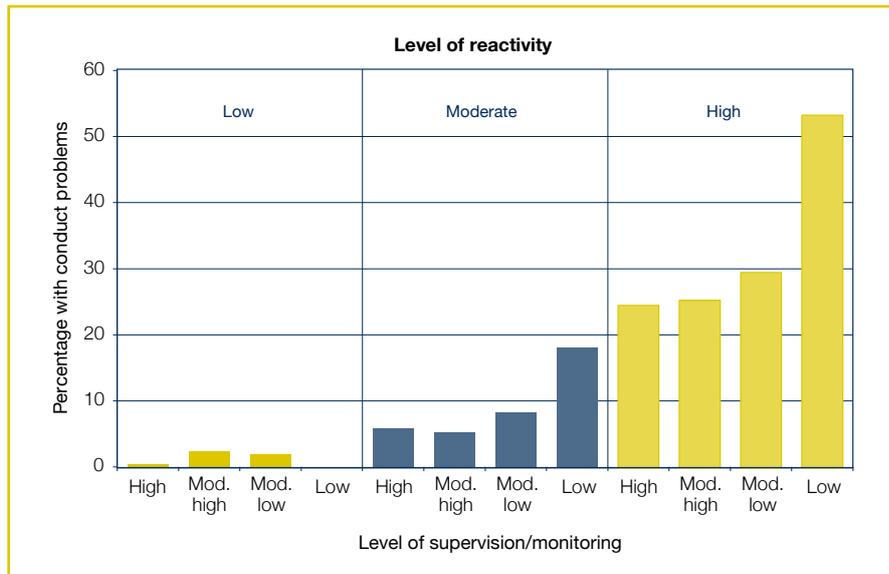
Connections between parenting and child wellbeing

Certain aspects of parenting are known to benefit all children. For example, a warm and supportive parent-child relationship is seen as the cornerstone of effective parenting (Dishion & McMahon, 1998). Supervision of children's activities and friendships (often termed "monitoring"), particularly in the teenage years, appears of great importance and its lack is linked to a range of problematic outcomes, such as adolescent antisocial behaviour and substance use (e.g. Barnes & Farrell, 1992). Limit setting and consistency are key components of "authoritative" parenting (Baumrind, 1989), which is widely seen as the most optimal type of parenting. Conversely, harsh or over-controlling parenting approaches are implicated in the development of behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence (e.g. Bender, Allen, & McElhaney, 2007).

However, there is intriguing evidence that effective parenting is more crucial for some children than others. Research from the Australian Temperament Project (ATP) found that rates of problems were much higher among temperamentally vulnerable adolescents who experienced poorer quality parenting (e.g. lower warmth, higher power assertion such as yelling/scolding, higher physical punishment, lower monitoring/supervision) by comparison with adolescents with a similar temperament style who received better quality parenting on these aspects (Letcher, Toumbourou, Sanson, Prior, Smart, & Oberklaid, 2004). On the other hand, rates of problems were low among temperamentally "easy" adolescents, regardless of the quality of parenting received.

One example of these trends is shown in Figure 1 on page 3, and shows on the left, trends for the group who were low on reactivity (they were rarely volatile, moody, intense); in the centre, the group who were average on reactivity; and on the right, the group who were highly reactive. These groups are further divided into sub-groups who received high, moderate, or low parental monitoring/supervision. The figure demonstrates that temperamentally "easy" adolescents (on the left) had low rates of conduct problems (e.g. fighting, stealing, disobedience), and these did not increase as levels of supervision decreased. On the other hand, rates of conduct problems were highest among very reactive adolescents (shown on the right), but those who were both very reactive and received low supervision/monitoring had double the rates of problems than their highly reactive counterparts who received closer monitoring.

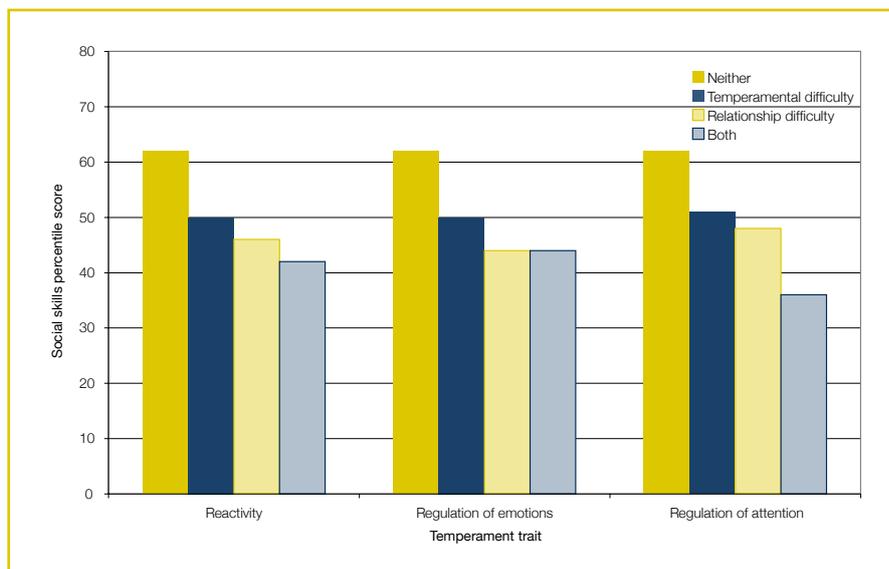
Figure 1: Connections between adolescent temperamental reactivity, parental monitoring and conduct problems at 13–14 years



Another piece of work from the ATP study compared the social skills of four groups of children (Smart & Sanson, 2001): those with an easy or average temperament style who had a good parent–child relationship (80%); those with a difficult temperament style (in the top one-fifth of the ATP sample on reactivity and/or low self regulation) but a good parent–child relationship (12%); those who were temperamentally easy or average but had a less positive parent–child relationship (parents reported difficulties in maintaining a good relationship with the child) (4%); and those who were both temperamentally difficult and had a less positive parent–child relationship (4%). The temperament traits on which the children were compared were reactivity (left), emotion regulation (centre) and attention regulation (right) (see Figure 2). Social skills encompassed skills in forming friendships, interacting with others, empathy, communication, and ability to respond appropriately in conflict situations.

Social skills were highest among the first group, somewhat lower among the second and third groups, and lowest among the group with both types of problems (see Figure 2). These findings

Figure 2: Connections between temperament style at 7–8 years, parent–child relationship at 7–8 years, and social skills at 11–12 years



point to the greater risk for problems among vulnerable children if there are difficulties in the parent–child relationship. Encouragingly, they also suggest that most parents find ways of managing their children and developing good relationships with them, even when their child is more difficult than average in temperament style.

Within the broad parameters of effective parenting is the growing recognition that “one size does not fit all”—that some parenting methods mesh well with particular types of children while other approaches work less well. Two types of children have been the focus of attention; firstly, shy, fearful, reticent children; and secondly, those who are volatile, feisty, and hard to manage.

Research findings regarding the parenting of shy, reticent children

Within the broad parameters of effective parenting is the growing recognition that “one size does not fit all”—that some parenting methods mesh well with particular types of children while other approaches work less well.

Shy, fearful children have been described as “slow to warm up” (Thomas & Chess, 1977). They tend to be cautious, and prefer to wait and see. They adapt more slowly to novelty and change than other children, but once they feel at home can be sociable, friendly and adventurous. The research undertaken by Graznya Kochanska (1997) showed that the conscience development of shy, reticent children was facilitated by a gentle style of discipline characterised by encouragement rather than threats. Such parenting was less effective for fearless children, for whom the use of consequences and a strong parent–child relationship were more salient for conscience development.

Similarly, Rubin, Cheah, & Fox (2001) found that over-protective parenting, in which children’s exposure to stressful situations is limited or controlled by an adult, was especially detrimental for shy, reticent children. Over-protection may limit a child’s range of social experiences and impede the child from learning how to manage stress and gain a sense of mastery from doing so. Rubin’s and colleagues’ research suggested that when shy children were over-protected, the likelihood of internalising problems (e.g. anxiety, unhappiness) substantially increased. However, parental over-protection did not seem to have such effects on more sociable, outgoing children. This research team also found that shy reticent children flourished when parental guidance and support was high.

Together, these findings suggest that a gentle, encouraging parenting approach, which provides guidance and support without tipping over into over-protection and control, is particularly beneficial for shy, reticent or fearful children.

Research findings regarding the parenting of volatile, feisty children

Children who are volatile and feisty can be challenging to parent. They respond intensely and strongly, can be easily frustrated, and find it hard to control their emotions. Parents’ boundaries and rules may be tested, and parents may find their resolve undermined or respond more extremely in an effort to maintain control. Gerald Patterson and colleagues describe this as a “coercive cycle” (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Scaramella & Leve, 2004). Patterson’s theory proposes that inexperienced or less skilful parents, who may overreact to minor non-compliance, are inflexible, or use harsh or inconsistent discipline, are liable to become involved in negative interactions with temperamentally volatile children. These escalate over time as parents and children increase their demands on each other and often end with the parent resorting to physical discipline or giving up. The child learns that demanding behaviour can be successful, aggression is acceptable, and fails to learn alternative problem solving skills. Aggressive behaviour can then become ingrained over time, leading to peer rejection, school failure, attachment to antisocial friends, and antisocial behaviour in adolescence. There is considerable evidence supporting many aspects of this theory.

Drawing from this research, parenting that is assertive, patient and firm as well as warm and affectionate appears most appropriate for volatile, feisty children. A gentle style of parenting is less effective with these children. Limit setting, maintaining consistency and following through with consequences are also important, as is parental support and affirmation of good behaviour (e.g. praising, rewarding). Finally, the research is clear-cut about the long-term ill effects of harsh or physical discipline on these children.

Translating the findings into practice

How, then, may parenting be adapted to harmonise with child characteristics? Some guidelines for parents and practitioners are provided below, as well as a description of some successful temperament-focused parenting interventions and useful resources.

Firstly, it is important for parents and professionals to recognise that a child's temperament style is not "good" or "bad" on its own, but very much depends on the context and situation. For example, a house with a large backyard may better suit a highly active child's energetic style than a small apartment, and high activity may impinge less on family life in the former circumstances. The "fit" between the child's temperament style and his/her environment is crucial. Sandra McCloskey makes the point in her book *Your child's unique temperament: Insights and strategies for responsive parenting* (2003) that there are pluses and minuses to any temperament style, as shown below. (In fact, many children will fall somewhere between these end points, and as stated earlier, each child will have his/her own unique mix of temperament traits).

Temperament style	Strengths	Possible concerns
High sociability	Friendly, outgoing, willing to try new things or to meet new people	May take too many risks, talk to strangers, try dangerous things
Low sociability	Does not rush into things, tends to be careful, considered	Shy, unwilling to try new things, meet new children or adults
High reactivity	Can be enthusiastic, do things with gusto	Can be volatile, intense, moody, negative
Low reactivity	Calm, placid, easy to get along with	May go along with the group too readily, may need to be more assertive
High attention regulation	Reliable, usually completes tasks without a lot of reminders	May have trouble stopping once a task has begun, can be a perfectionist
Low attention regulation	Can easily switch from one activity to another, can be very creative	May need help or supervision to complete homework and other tasks

Adapted from McCloskey (2003), p. 27.

Hence, parents should be encouraged to appreciate their child's positive qualities, strengths, and the things he/she does well, or as McCloskey suggests, "affirm the child's goodness and talents" (p. 63). Likewise, it is important to understand the child's temperament style and respect the child's uniqueness without comparing him/her to other children or trying to remake his/her basic disposition. By understanding the child's temperament, parents can work with, rather than against, the child. Labelling the child as "easy" or "difficult" is to be avoided, as this can become self-fulfilling and limiting. In fact, research shows that some change in children's temperament style normally occurs as they grow up, acquire new skills, and expand their capacities (see Sanson, Letcher, & Smart, 2007).

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How can we help parents gain understanding of their child's temperament? There are at least two possibilities here: a) seek parents' observations of their child's typical style over time, and b) invite parents to complete temperament focused questions. Each can then be used as a basis for dialogue about the child's temperamental tendencies and ways of working with these. McCloskey (2003) suggests that parents be provided with an overview of the nature of child temperament, and then asked to keep a record over a period of days of how their own child handles unexpected changes in activities or stressful experiences. Some likely scenarios are when the child has to stop doing an enjoyable activity (e.g. watching television), when there is a change in plans (e.g. a delay or abandonment of an outing), or when the child is asked to follow an instruction (e.g. change clothes). Parents should pay attention to *how* the child

reacts (e.g. mildly or strongly, happily or unhappily) rather than *what* he/she actually does, noting aspects such as how prolonged the child's reaction is, and the intensity with which he/she reacts. From this, a picture of the child's typical style should emerge.

It can also be helpful for parents to complete a temperament questionnaire about their child. However, it is usually preferable to seek parents' observations, as these may yield a wider variety of behaviours to consider and the focus is more directly on the child's unique qualities, avoiding the labelling that may occur when comparisons to other children are made (e.g. via reference to norms). Temperament questionnaires are available for infants, toddlers and children. Some example items are shown below.

Temperament trait	Infancy item	Toddler item	Child item
Sociability/shyness	Is shy (turns away or clings to mother) on meeting another child for the first time	Is outgoing with adult strangers outside the home	When in a park or visiting, will go up to strange children and join in their play
Reactivity	Displays much feeling (strong laugh or cry) during changing or dressing	Responds to frustration intensely (screams, yells)	When upset or annoyed with a task, throws it down, cries, slams doors etc.
Attention regulation	Keeps at it for many minutes when working on a new skill (e.g. rolling over, picking up an object)	Plays continuously for more than 10 minutes at a time with a favourite toy	Likes to complete one task or activity before going onto the next

Children's temperament style comes to the fore when there is stress. It can therefore be useful for parents to anticipate the situations that may be challenging for their child and be ready to provide the necessary support.

Children's temperament style comes to the fore when there is stress. It can therefore be useful for parents to anticipate the situations that may be challenging for their child and be ready to provide the necessary support. Temperament also influences the ease with which children handle life transitions such as beginning child care or starting school. While all concerned obviously try to ensure a happy, harmonious transition, this may be easier for some children than others, and considerable ongoing efforts may be needed before some are at ease.

Once parents have gained an understanding of their child's temperamental disposition, they should then be encouraged to reflect on their child rearing methods. The aim is to achieve a good "fit" between child and parent, which may involve some adaptation of parenting methods and the family environment to mesh with child characteristics. Family life will be more enjoyable if parents are tuned into and accommodating of their child's temperament style. As the ATP study showed, most parents were able to find ways of managing their children and forging good relationships with them, even when their children were more reactive or less self controlled than average. Parents need also to consider their own temperament style and how this matches their child's style. For example, very outgoing parents might find a child's shyness hard to understand and may need to adjust their expectations for the child. Due to their greater maturity, it may be easier for parents than children to modify their natural responses when there are clashes, but parents need first to be sensitive to the situation.

Returning now to the two types of children discussed earlier — shy, reticent children and volatile, feisty children — some specific parenting strategies are now outlined.

Strategies for shy, reticent children

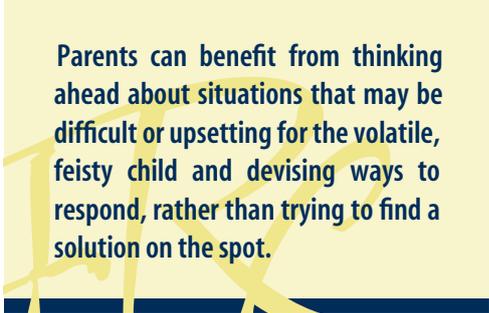
Shy, reticent children should be given opportunities to explore a variety of social situations and warmly encouraged in such exploratory activities. Without encouragement, their natural withdrawing tendencies may prevent them from gaining valuable social experiences and learning how to manage them. However, such opportunities need to be within the child's comfort zone: it can be counter-productive for parents to push children to participate and be sociable, to expect them to feel at ease in large social gatherings, or to provide so many social experiences that the child feels overwhelmed. Instead, the child may benefit from small encounters in a setting in which he/she feels at home. Inviting one or two peers over to play in the child's home or at a favourite park can be a good start. It can also be helpful for parents to prepare children ahead of time for social activities so they have a chance to think things over and feel ready to cope. Talking about an upcoming social event the day before can be beneficial, as can gentle reminders that the child has enjoyed a similar type of event in the past. Gradually, the child will feel more confident and willing to take on new social experiences. He/she may never be the "life of the party" however, and parents' expectations may need to be modified to be in tune with this.

While shy, reticent children need sensitive parenting, it is clear that parents should avoid over-protection, hard as this may be sometimes. Excessive reassurance should be avoided, as should parental intrusiveness in the child's interactions with others. Jumping in and acting for the child may send a message that the parent lacks confidence in the child's ability to handle the situation. Thus, parents do best to provide suitable social experiences, but then step back and allow the child to cope with these encounters, intervening only if the child shows clear distress (some unease may be expected).

Strategies for volatile, feisty children

Parents can benefit from thinking ahead about situations that may be difficult or upsetting for the volatile, feisty child and devising ways to respond, rather than trying to find a solution on the spot. It can be helpful for parents to reflect on the strategies that have been successful, and unsuccessful, in the past. These strategies may have been used by the parent or others e.g. one's partner, relatives, carers. When a child is reacting negatively, parents should try to respond briefly and calmly (although this may be difficult, especially when parents themselves are upset), as giving too much attention can reinforce the behaviour and can signal that the behaviour works as a means of attention or control. Small children particularly benefit from clear, brief instructions which may require repeating. Diverting the child's attention elsewhere or turning the conversation towards something more positive is often effective, although the reason for the child's distress needs to be acknowledged. If the episode continues, it is often best to ignore the child's emotional reaction. If a parent is upset or feeling overwhelmed, it can help to physically distance oneself from the child, giving both parent and child time to calm down. It can also be useful to differentiate between the issue that provoked the emotional reaction and the reaction itself, and to focus on the issue.

Volatile, feisty children especially benefit from clear boundaries. Setting limits gives the child guidance about acceptable behaviour and fosters the development of self control. Parents need to remain firm on important limits and to maintain consistency both in their own parenting and with their partner's parenting (if applicable). The giving of explanations for decisions and motives is also important. This involves listening to the child's point of view and jointly negotiating a solution where possible. McClowry (2003) suggests that for older children who are volatile and feisty, behaviour contracts can be effective. These can reduce or eliminate an undesired behaviour, alter the power base between parent and child, and replace a negative behaviour



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with a more positive one. Behaviour contracts need to be agreed upon by both parent and child, with tangible, short-term objectives and rewards. McClowry gives some very helpful guidelines about how these should be managed (pp. 45–50). Finally, self awareness of how children “push our buttons” is valuable and can help parents avoid negative cycles of interaction with the child which can escalate and spiral over time.

Successful interventions

There have been several intervention programs that have had success in helping parents to tailor parenting to match the child. These have shown improvements in parenting practices, parental confidence and child outcomes. Van Den Boom (1994, 1995) undertook a relatively short intervention in which 50 low socio-economic status Dutch mothers of 6-month-old irritable infants were provided with individual skills training, with mothers and babies subsequently compared to a matched untreated (i.e. control) group of irritable infants and their mothers. The intervention consisted of training in soothing and playing with the baby and was provided in two-hourly sessions held once a month for three months. At 9 months, intervention group mothers were more responsive, stimulating and visually attentive. Their babies tended to be more sociable, cried less, were less reactive, and more exploratory of their environment. At 12 months, intervention group babies were more likely to be securely attached. Group differences persisted over time, with better child adjustment and more effective parenting evident among the intervention group when compared with the control group at 18, 24 and 42 months of age. A key aspect of this intervention may have been that it reached children and parents early, before difficulties became entrenched.

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In the US, Sheeber (1994) provided a temperament-focused intervention for mothers of temperamentally difficult preschoolers. Forty mothers of 3–5 year old children were randomly assigned to a parent-training program or a wait-list control group. The intervention consisted of 9 small-group, one-and-a-half- to two-hourly sessions held once a week, sessions in which parents were introduced to the concept of child temperament and then received training in behaviour management techniques that complement differing temperament characteristics. At the end of each session, parents were encouraged to try differing strategies during the upcoming week and the effectiveness

of these was discussed at the beginning of the following session. Immediately following the intervention and two months later, intervention group mothers reported greater satisfaction with parent–child relationships and with their parenting competence, and there were fewer disruptions in family lifestyle. Intervention group children displayed fewer behaviour problems, although their temperament style was unchanged. While still preliminary and small-scale, these interventions show that temperament-focused training can be effective and achieve immediate as well as longer-term gains for parents and children.

Useful resources

This paper has provided a brief introduction to the topic of tailoring parenting to fit the child. For those interested in reading more about the research on this topic, the book chapter by Putnam, Sanson and Rothbart (2002) is a useful starting point (see the References list on page 9). A number of publications describe theories and research findings on the general topic of children’s temperament style, for example, Rothbart and Bates (2006) and Sanson, Hemphill and Smart (2004). The book by McClowry (2003) is a useful source of practical advice for parents.

Helpful information for parents can also be found on the following websites:

University of Wisconsin, US – Parenting Newsletters

www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/parenting/unique.html

Parenting SA—Parent Easy Guides

www.parenting.sa.gov.au/pegs

Raising Children Network—the Australian parenting website

raisingchildren.net.au

Information on the **Australian Temperament Project** can be found at:

www.aifs.gov.au/atp

Bibliographies on parenting can be found on the **Australian Family Relationships**

Clearinghouse website at:

www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/bibs/parenting.html

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