



Difficult OR Different?

One mother shares her EXPERIENCES of parenting a child who didn't neatly FIT IN at school. After years of being LABELLED, she offers advice to parents who may feel challenged...

WORDS by ELAINE HALLIGAN

I am the parent of a child who is different and these differences have meant that he has been difficult to parent. His temperament is sensitive, intense and impulsive, and these traits have meant that both at home and at school his behaviour has been problematic. So problematic that by the age of seven, he was asked to leave his third school in as many years.

Our son's needs were varied and complex, and although we now know he is severely dyslexic, he was diagnosed with so many three-letter abbreviations, he became known as the Alphabet Kid. First it was Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), then Asperger Syndrome, then Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). The professionals then threw in a bit of Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) for good measure, and when we were finally told that our son had Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), I came home and cried.

Parents' observations of their children are usually very astute, and in my parent-coaching work, I am often heard telling my



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clients “you are the expert on your child”. It may be that you don’t know what the problem is or how to fix it, nor how to help and support your child, but your child is tricky to handle and you just sense something is not quite right.

Your child may not have diagnosed specific learning needs, but is often misunderstood and perhaps judged by others around him due to difficult behaviour. You may have started to catastrophise as you know the stakes are high now. We want to ensure our children are happy and successful, and that they enter adult life with good self-esteem and resilience to ensure they will cope with whatever life throws at them.

Society quickly judges those who present differently. If our children behave inappropriately, we often feel criticised and believe their behaviour is a reflection on our parenting.

We knew our son was a good and capable boy with a strong moral compass. On many occasions, he just could not help what he did. When we asked him why he had thrown my prized Jo Malone candle on the floor, he said: “I don’t know. I just could

not help myself.” Now with greater understanding, I realise he was telling us the absolute truth. He was incredibly impulsive and lacked self-control, but that did not make him a bad person. Our children are born with a temperament that provides their default position for interaction with the world, but we can use our communication skills to support them to understand themselves and help them to succeed.

So what steps can you take to support your ‘difficult’ child?

1 Understand and accept their temperament – this allows you to respond more effectively to their needs. We can’t change temperament, but we can help our children to develop better responses.

2 Build strong self-esteem – children behave better, take more responsibility, try new things and are more resilient when they have good self-esteem. So approve and affirm them by noticing and commenting on what they are doing right rather than giving most of your attention to the difficult behaviour. Criticism is de-motivating and lowers self-esteem.

3 Be your child’s emotion coach – how your child feels influences how he behaves. We need to help our children name their emotions in order to tame them. This means accepting their feelings (even anger and jealousy) and letting them know we understand how they feel. It doesn’t mean you permit the behaviour. Take steps to teach your child how to behave when they’re calm.

4 Realise that all behaviour has a cause – when we understand what is causing the behaviour, we can stay calm and help children learn so they take responsibility. It can be very simple – they’re tired, bored, hungry or unwell, or it could be more complex. They could be full of emotion, their brains are immature, they have a different agenda from ours, we are inconsistent or perhaps we are doing some poor modelling.

5 Don’t punish – punishment makes a child feel bad about himself, and is often delivered in anger and with criticism. No learning can take place when a child is afraid or feels resentful and it often results in more rebellious behaviour. Problem-solve with your child and use teaching consequences. Try take-twos for minor misbehaviours. When a child whines, instead of criticising and scolding, you say: “It’s hard for me to hear you like that. Please use your strong voice and that way I can listen!”

Over the years, with developing awareness of how to parent more positively and researching good educational environments, our son finished school on a high as head boy and is now a budding entrepreneur whilst studying at university. I have no idea what the future holds, but what I do know is having experienced spectacular failure in his early years, he now has a drive and resilience that belies his years. He’ll be OK.

Elaine Halligan is London director of The Parent Practice, an organisation that enables parents to bring out the best in their children.