

# DIFFICULT BEHAVIOR IN YOUNG CHILDREN

From time to time, all children behave in ways that are puzzling and upsetting to their parents. Behavior such as wildness, refusing to eat or go to bed, pickiness, whining, tantrums and clinging, is often based on the child's inborn nature-his or her basic temperament.

Dr. Stanley Turecki, physician in charge of the Difficult Child Program at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City-himself the parent of a once-difficult child and the author of the Bantam Book, *THE DIFFICULT CHILD*-says, "Problem behavior based on temperament is no one's fault. Not yours and not the child's. However, by learning to understand your child's temperament, you will be able to manage such behavior successfully and enjoy your child more.

Here are some guidelines based on Dr. Turecki's work with parents.

## ERRATIC EATING AND SLEEPING

Some children simply are not hungry or sleepy at the same times every day. Try to think of your child as having an irregular "inner clock" so that you must impose regular routines and schedules from without. Remember, however, that while you have every right to say what mealtime or bedtime should be, you should not force your child to eat or sleep. Let him stop eating when his appetite is satisfied, and allow him to read or play with a toy in bed (not watch TV) until he falls asleep. Your child is likely to settle into healthier eating and sleeping habits once the power struggle is removed.

## TRANSITIONS

Some children have trouble with sudden changes in activity. They become "locked in" and very absorbed and may resist or even tantrum when interrupted. The key here is not to surprise the child. Always try to give her a few minutes warning. For example, if your daughter is watching TV and it's time to go out, tell her, "In five minutes we have to leave for school, so get ready to turn off the TV." Once the five minutes are up, be firm!

## OVER ACTIVITY AND WILDNESS

Parents can be tired out by a restless, disorganized and impulsive child who easily loses control. Learn to recognize the signs that your child is getting "revved up" and then intervene early, before behavior escalates to wildness or a tantrum. If you are in a public place, leave quickly. Take him somewhere else to calm down. Such a child needs consistent morning and evening routines. It doesn't matter what the routine consists of-it's the sameness that counts. For example, bath, snack, brushing teeth and bedtime story should be in the same order every evening. Routines should also include a period of active play as an outlet for this child's energy.

## NEGATIVE REACTIONS

Some children take a long time to warm up to new situations or people, or, because they are serious by nature, never express enthusiasm openly in social situations; this can lead to hurt feelings and embarrassment for the parents. You can help by preparing your child in advance for an event such as a birthday party. Then, when you arrive, show him you understand by saying something like, "I know it takes you a long time to get used to things. You can stay close to me until you're ready to play." Stay calm, and remind yourself that this is the way your child is. Forcing him to go ahead when he's not ready will cause more trouble.

If your child "hates" a new article of clothing or a toy, give time a chance. For example, let your daughter keep a new pair of shoes in the closet for a few days. Then gently encourage her to wear them for an hour or two each day in the house. By doing so, you will avoid unnecessary battles. By the time she needs the shoes for school, they'll no longer be "new".

However, strong likes and dislikes, even when they seem unreasonable to you, may also be the result of actual physical over sensitivity to textures, tastes, temperatures, or colors. Food fads and problems over clothes may literally be a matter of taste. Ask yourself whether it's really important to make an issue over what your child wears to nursery school or takes for lunch. Whenever possible, respect his strong preferences.

## STUBBORNNESS AND DEFIANCE

Strong willed children can draw their parents into many power struggles that simply reinforce the resistant behavior. It is important here to decide in advance what is really relevant to you and what you can allow to let go. Don't fight your child on every issue but when you do take a stand, do it early, without getting into a lot of back and forth. Be brief and firm without getting angry yourself. Establish clear rules, and let your child know what the penalty for breaking them will be. And then follow through consistently.