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1

UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF CHILDREN



1 I took a class in child development, and the professor emphasized the influence of culture in shaping the human personality. He said, "All behavior is caused by what we experience." What does that mean, and do you agree with it?

It means that children are merely responders to environmental influences occurring in a lifetime and that if all those experiential factors were known, every behavior (and misbehavior) would be explained. Do I agree with this view? Not for a minute. It is a mechanistic, deterministic theory that makes robots out of human beings. If it were valid, we would never be capable of independent action, free choice, or discernment of right and wrong. This is an unbiblical theory that strikes at the heart of the God-man relationship. We are morally accountable because the Creator put within us the ability to think, to choose, to judge, and even the freedom to do evil. We are capable of rational thought that is greatly influenced, but not "caused," by what we experience. There are other influences that come from within—including those related to the temperament with which we arrive in the delivery room. Human behavior is far more complicated than believed in the past, yet some learned people still think we are the sum total of our experiences.

The psychologist who spoke at your school was expressing a historic tenet of his (and my) profession. I just happen to disagree with it emphatically.

2 **Talk more about the inborn temperament in babies. What do we know about their little personalities before they have interacted with the world at all?**

Philosophers Locke and Rousseau told us in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that babies came into the world as *tabula rasas*, or “blank slates,” upon which society and the environment wrote the fundamentals of personality.¹ But they were also wrong. Every newborn is unique from every other baby, even from the first moments outside the womb. Except for identical twins, triplets, etc., no two are alike in biochemistry or genetics.

How foolish of philosophers and behavioral scientists to have thought otherwise. If God makes every grain of sand unique and every snowflake like no other, how simplistic to have believed He mass-produces little human robots. That is nonsense. We are, after all, made in His image.

Just ask the real experts—the mothers who understand their babies better than anyone. They’ll tell you that each of their infants had a different “feel”—a different personality—from the first moment they were held. If these mothers are eventually blessed with six or eight or even twenty children, they will continue to say emphatically that every one of them was unique and distinct from the others when only one hour old. They are right—and their perceptions are being confirmed by scientific inquiry.

3 **What does research tell us about the personalities of newborns?**

One of the most ambitious studies yet conducted took a period of three decades to complete. That investigation is known in professional literature as the New York Longitudinal Study. The findings from this investigation, led by psychiatrists Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas, were reported in their excellent book for parents entitled *Know Your Child*.

Chess and Thomas found that babies not only differ significantly from one another at the moment of birth, but those differences tend to be rather persistent throughout childhood. Even more interestingly, they observed three broad categories, or patterns of temperaments, into which the majority of children can be classified. First they referred to “the difficult child,” who is characterized by negative reactions to people, intense mood swings, irregular sleep patterns and feeding schedules, frequent periods of crying, and violent tantrums when frustrated.

Does that sound familiar? I described those individuals many years ago as “strong-willed” children.

The second pattern is called “the easy child,” who manifests a positive approach


to people, quiet adaptability to new situations, regular sleep patterns and feeding schedules, and a willingness to accept the rules of the game. The authors concluded, “Such a youngster is usually a joy to his or her parents, pediatrician and teachers.”² Amen.

My term for the easy child is “compliant.”

The third category was given the title “slow-to-warm-up” or “shy.” These youngsters respond negatively to new situations, and they adapt slowly. However, they are less intense than difficult children, and they tend to have regular sleeping and feeding schedules. When they are upset or frustrated, they typically withdraw from the situation and react mildly, rather than explode with anger and rebellion.

Not every child fits into one of these categories, of course, but approximately 65 percent do. Drs. Chess and Thomas also emphasized that babies are fully human at birth, being able immediately to relate to their parents and learn from their environments. I doubt if that news will come as a surprise to most mothers, who never believed in the “blank slate” theory, anyway.

It should not be difficult to understand why these findings from longitudinal research have been exciting to me. They confirm my own clinical observations, not only about the wonderful complexity of human beings, but also about the categories of temperament identified by Drs. Chess and Thomas.

 **4 Tell me why some kids with every advantage and opportunity seem to turn out bad, while others raised in terrible homes become pillars in the community. I know one young man who grew up in squalid circumstances, yet he is such a fine person today. How did his parents manage to raise such a responsible son when they didn't even seem to care?**

That illustrates just the point I have been trying to make. Neither heredity nor environment will account for all human behavior. There is something else there—something from within—that also operates to make us who we are. Some behavior is caused, and some plainly isn't.

Several years ago, for example, I had dinner with two parents who had unofficially “adopted” a thirteen-year-old boy. This youngster followed their son home one afternoon and asked if he could spend the night. As it turned out, he stayed with them for almost a week without so much as a phone call coming from his mother. It was later learned that she works sixteen hours a day and has no interest in her son. Her alcoholic husband divorced her several years ago and left town without a trace. The boy had been abused, unloved, and ignored through much of his life.

Given this background, what kind of kid do you think he is today—a druggie? a foul-mouthed delinquent? a lazy, insolent bum? No. He is polite to adults; he is a hard worker; he makes good grades in school and enjoys helping around the house. This boy is like a lost puppy who desperately wants a good home. He begged the family to adopt him officially so he could have a real father and a loving mother. His own mom couldn't care less.

How could this teenager be so well disciplined and polished despite his lack of training? I don't know. It is simply within him. He reminds me of my wonderful friend David Hernandez. David and his parents came to America illegally from Mexico more than fifty years ago and nearly starved to death before they found work. They eventually survived by helping to harvest the potato crop throughout the state of California. During this era, David lived under trees or in the open fields. His father made a stove out of an oil drum half-filled with dirt. The open campfire was the centerpiece of their home.

David never had a roof over his head until his parents finally moved into an abandoned chicken coop. His mother covered the boarded walls with cheap wallpaper, and David thought they were living in luxury. Then one day, the city of San Jose condemned the area, and David's "house" was torn down. He couldn't understand why the community would destroy so fine a place.

Given this beginning, how can we explain the man that David Hernandez became? He graduated near the top of his class in high school and was granted a scholarship to college. Again, he earned high marks and four years later entered Loma Linda University School of Medicine. Once more, he scored in the top 10 percent of his class and continued in a residency in obstetrics and gynecology. Eventually, he served as a professor of OB-GYN at both Loma Linda University and the University of Southern California medical schools. Then, at the peak of his career, his life began to unravel.

I'll never forget the day Dr. Hernandez called me on the telephone. He had just been released from the hospital following a battery of laboratory tests. The diagnosis? Sclerosing cholangitis, a liver disorder that was invariably fatal at that time. We lost this fine husband, father, and friend six years later at the age of forty-three. I loved him like a brother, and I still miss him today.

Again, I ask, how could such discipline and genius come from these infertile circumstances? Who would have thought that this deprived Mexican boy sitting out there in the dirt would someday become one of the most loved and respected surgeons of his era? Where did the motivation originate? From what bubbling spring did his ambition and thirst for knowledge flow? He had no books, took no educa-

tional trips, knew no scholars. Yet he reached for the sky. Why did it happen to David Hernandez and not the youngster with every advantage and opportunity?

Why have so many children of prominent and loving parents grown up in ideal circumstances only to reject it all for the streets of Atlanta, San Francisco, or New York? Good answers are simply not available. It apparently comes down to this: God chooses to use individuals in unique ways. Beyond that mysterious relationship, we must simply conclude that some kids seem born to make it and others are determined to fail. Someone reminded me recently that the same boiling water that softens the carrot also hardens the egg. Likewise, some individuals react positively to certain circumstances and others negatively. We don't know why.

Two things are clear to me from this understanding. First, parents have been far too quick to take the credit or blame for the way their children turn out. Those with bright young superstars stick out their chests and say, "Look what we accomplished." Those with twisted and irresponsible kids wonder, "Where did we go wrong?" Well, neither is entirely accurate. No one would deny that parents play an important role in the development and training of their children. But they are only part of the formula from which a young adult is assembled.

Second, behavioral scientists have been far too simplistic in their explanation of human behavior. We are more than the aggregate of our experiences. We are more than the quality of our nutrition. We are more than our genetic heritage. We are more than our biochemistry. And certainly, we are more than our parents' influence. God has created us as unique individuals, capable of independent and rational thought that is not attributable to any source. That is what makes the task of parenting so challenging and rewarding. Just when you think you have your kids figured out, you had better brace yourself! Something new is coming your way.




5 **Does Scripture confirm that babies have temperaments or personalities before birth?**

Yes, in several references we learn that God knows and relates to unborn children as individuals. He said to the prophet Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5, RSV). The apostle Paul said he was also chosen before birth (see Ephesians 1:4). And in a remarkable account, we are told of the prenatal development of the twins Jacob and Esau. As predicted before their births, one turned out to be rebellious and tough while the other was something of a mama's boy. They were fighting before they were born and continued in conflict through much of their lives (see Genesis 25:22-27). Then later, in one of the most

mysterious and disturbing statements in the Bible, the Lord said, “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated” (Romans 9:13, KJV). Apparently, God discerned a rebellious nature in Esau before he was born and knew that he would not be receptive to the divine Spirit.

These references tell us that unborn children are unique individuals with whom God is already acquainted. These examples also confirm for me, at least, the wickedness of abortion, which destroys those embryonic little personalities.

 **6 I have two children who are as different as night and day. In fact, they conform perfectly to your description of “strong-willed” and “compliant” children. One is a spitfire, and the other is a sweetheart. I am very interested in knowing more about what this means for them long-term. Beyond everyday issues of discipline and relating within a family, what can you tell me about these kids?**

You’ll be interested to know that more than thirty-five thousand parents participated in a study I conducted to answer those specific questions. It is described in detail in my book *Parenting Isn’t for Cowards*, but let me boil down eleven of the most important findings. Remember that these conclusions represent common traits and characteristics that may or may not apply to your two children. These descriptions represent what typically happens with very strong-willed children (SWC) and very compliant children (CC) as the years unfold.

Conclusion 1: In the human family, there are nearly three times as many SWCs as CCs. Nearly every family with multiple children has at least one SWC.

Conclusion 2: Male SWCs outnumber females by about 5 percent, and female CCs outnumber males by about 6 percent. Thus, there is a slight tendency for males to have tougher temperaments and for females to be more compliant, but it can be, and often is, reversed.

Conclusion 3: The birth order has nothing to do with being strong-willed or compliant. These elements of temperament are basically inherited and can occur in the eldest or in the baby.

Conclusion 4: Most parents know they have an SWC very early. One-third can tell it at birth. Two-thirds know by the first birthday, and 92 percent are certain by the third birthday. Parents of compliant children know it even earlier.

Conclusion 5: The temperaments of children tend to reflect those of their parents. Although there are many exceptions, two strong-willed parents are more likely to produce tough-minded kids and vice versa.

Conclusion 6: What can parents expect from SWCs in the teen years? The answer? A battle! Fully 74 percent of SWCs rebel significantly during adolescence.

Conclusion 7: Incredibly, only 3 percent of CCs experience severe rebellion in adolescence, and just 14 percent even go into mild rebellion. They start out life with a smile on their face and keep it there into young adulthood.

Conclusion 8: The best news for parents of SWCs is the rapid decrease in their rebellion in young adulthood. It drops almost immediately in the early twenties and then trails off even more from there. Some are still angry into their twenties and early thirties, but the fire is gone for the majority. They peacefully rejoin the human community.

Conclusion 9: The CC is much more likely to be a good student than the SWC. Nearly three times as many SWCs made Ds and Fs during the last two years of high school as did CCs. Approximately 80 percent of CCs were A and B students.

Conclusion 10: The CC is considerably better adjusted socially than the SWC. It would appear that the youngster who is inclined to challenge the authority of his parents is also more likely to behave offensively with his peers.

Conclusion 11: The CC typically enjoys much higher self-esteem than the SWC. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this finding. Only 19 percent of compliant teenagers either disliked themselves (17 percent) or felt extreme self-hatred (2 percent). Of the very strong-willed teenagers, however, 35 percent disliked themselves, and 8 percent experienced extreme self-hatred.

Those were the primary findings from our study. It yielded a picture of the compliant child as being someone more at peace with himself or herself, as well as with parents, teachers, and peers.

The strong-willed child, by contrast, seems compelled from within to fuss, fight, test, question, resist, and challenge. Why is he or she like that? It is difficult to say, except to affirm that they are more unsettled in every aspect of their lives. We do know that lower self-esteem is related to the excessive peer dependency, academic difficulties, social problems, and even rebellion we have seen. Acceptance of one's intrinsic worth is the core of the personality. When it is unsteady, everything else is affected.



7 What are the long-range implications of raising a strong-willed child? What can we expect as the years go by?

Well, I can give you a few encouraging conclusions from our study. The tendency of strong-willed children is to return to parental values when they reach adulthood. Parents told us that 85 percent of their grown SWCs (twenty-four years of age and older) came back to what they had been taught—entirely or at least “some-what.” That is good news. Only 15 percent were so headstrong that they rejected their family’s core values in their mid-twenties. In those exceptional cases, I’ll wager that other problems and sources of pain were involved.

What this means, first of all, is that these tough-minded kids will argue and fight and complain throughout their years at home, but the majority will turn around when they reach young adulthood and do what their parents most desired. That should be reassuring. Furthermore, if we could have evaluated these individuals at thirty-five instead of twenty-four years of age, we would have seen that even fewer were still in rebellion against parental values.

Second, raising a strong-willed child (or a houseful of them) can be a lonely job for parents. You can begin to feel like yours is the only family that has gone through these struggles. Don’t believe it. In another study of three thousand parents, we found that 85 percent of families had at least one strong-willed child. *This is parenthood. This is human nature.*

Third, I urge you as parents of strong-willed children not to feel “cheated” or depressed by the assignment of raising such individuals. You are not an exception or the butt of some cruel cosmic joke. All human beings, including the very compliant child, arrive with a generous assortment of flaws. Yes, it is more difficult to raise an independent little fellow or gal, but you can do it! You can, through prayer and supplication before the Lord, bring him or her to that period of harmony in early adulthood that makes the effort worthwhile. I also believe that you can increase the odds of transmitting your values to these individuals by following some time-honored principles found in Scripture. So hang in there! Nothing of value in life comes easy anyway, except the free gift of salvation from Jesus Christ.

Hold tightly to Solomon’s encouraging words, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6, KJV).



8 OK, I understand the strong-willed child better than I did. But tell me how to get our son through these tough years. He is tough as nails. What specific suggestions do you have for us?

Here is a summary of some approaches or ideas that I think are important:

1. You should not blame yourself for the temperament with which your child

- was born. He (or she) is simply a tough kid to handle, and your task is to rise to the challenge.
2. He is in greater danger because of his inclination to test the limits and scale the walls. Your utmost diligence and wisdom will be required to deal with him.
 3. If you fail to understand his lust for power and independence, you can exhaust your resources and bog down in guilt. It will benefit no one.
 4. For parents who have just begun, take charge of your babies. Hold tightly to the reins of authority in the early days, and build an attitude of respect during your brief window of opportunity. You will need every ounce of “awe” you can get during the years to come. Once you have established your right to lead, begin to let go systematically, year by year.
 5. Don’t panic, even during the storms of adolescence. Better times are ahead.
 6. Don’t let your son get too far from you emotionally. Stay in touch. Don’t write him off, even when every impulse is to do just that. He needs you now more than ever before.
 7. Give him time to find himself, even if he appears not to be searching.
 8. Most important, I urge you to hold your children before the Lord in fervent prayer throughout their years at home. I am convinced that there is no other source of confidence and wisdom in parenting. There is not enough knowledge in the books, mine or anyone else’s, to counteract the evil that surrounds our kids today. Teenagers are confronted by drugs, alcohol, sex, and foul language wherever they turn. And, of course, the peer pressure on them is enormous. We must bathe them in prayer every day of their lives. The God who made your children will hear your petitions. He has promised to do so. After all, He loves them more than you do.

And a concluding word: Remember that anyone can raise the easy kid. Guiding an SWC through the rebellious years takes a pro with a lot of love to give. I’ll bet you’re up to the task!



9 What are the special needs of a compliant kid—one that goes along to get along? Does he have any special needs?


That’s a great question, and the answer is yes. When one child is a stick of dynamite and the other is an all-star sweetheart, the cooperative, gentle individual can easily be taken for granted. If there’s an unpleasant job to be done, he may be expected to do it because Mom and Dad just don’t have the energy to fight with the

tiger. When it is necessary for one child to sacrifice or do without, there's a tendency to pick the one who won't complain as loudly. Under these circumstances, the compliant boy or girl comes out on the short end of the stick.

The consequences of such inequity should be obvious. The responsible child often becomes angry over time. He has a sense of powerlessness and resentment that simmers below the surface. He's like the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son told by Jesus. He didn't rebel against his father. He stayed behind and ran the farm while his irresponsible brother squandered his money on fun and games. Who could blame him for resenting little bro? His response is typical of the compliant, hardworking sibling.

I strongly recommend that parents seek to balance the scales in dealing with the compliant child. Make sure he gets his fair share of parental attention. Help him find ways to cope with his overbearing sibling. And, within reason, give him the right to make his own decisions.


There's nothing simple about raising kids, is there? Even the "easiest" of them needs our very best effort.



10 **How can you say that precious little newborns come into the world inherently evil? I agree with the experts who say that babies are born good and they only learn to do wrong later.**

Please understand that the issue here is not with the purity or innocence of babies. No one would question their preciousness as creations of God. The point of disagreement concerns the tendencies and inclinations they have inherited. People who believe in "innate goodness" would have us believe that human beings are naturally unselfish, honest, respectful, kind to others, self-controlled, obedient to authority, etc. Children, as you indicated, then subsequently learn to do wrong when they are exposed to a corrupt and misguided society. Bad *experiences* are responsible for bad behavior. To raise healthy kids, then, it is the task of parents to provide a loving environment and then stay out of the way. Natural goodness will flow from within.

This is the humanistic perspective on childish nature. Millions of people believe it to be true. Most psychologists have also accepted and taught this notion throughout the twentieth century. There is only one thing wrong with the concept. It is entirely inaccurate.



11 **How can you be so sure about the nature of children? What evidence do you have to support the belief that their tendency is to do wrong?**

We'll start with what the "Owner's Manual" has to say about human nature. Only the Creator of children can tell us how He made them, and He has done that in Scripture. It teaches that we are born in sin, having inherited a disobedient nature from Adam. King David said, "In sin did my mother *conceive* me" (Psalm 51:5, KJV, italics added), meaning that this tendency to do wrong was transmitted genetically. Paul tells us it has infected every person who ever lived. "For *all* have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23, KJV, italics added). Therefore, with or without bad associations, children are naturally inclined toward rebellion, selfishness, dishonesty, aggression, exploitation, and greed. They don't have to be taught these behaviors. They are natural expressions of their humanness.

Although this perspective is viewed with disdain by the secular world today, the evidence to support it is overwhelming. How else do we explain the pugnacious and perverse nature of every society on earth? Bloody warfare has been the centerpiece of world history for more than five thousand years. People of every race and creed around the globe have tried to rape, plunder, burn, blast, and kill each other century after century. Peace has been but a momentary pause when they stopped to reload! Plato said more than 2,350 years ago, "Only dead men have seen an end to war."³ He was right, and it will continue that way until the Prince of Peace comes.


Not only have nations warred against each other since the beginning of time, we also find a depressing incidence of murder, drug abuse, child molestation, prostitution, adultery, homosexuality, and dishonesty among individuals. How would we account for this pervasive evil in a world of people who are naturally inclined toward good? Have they really drifted into these antisocial and immoral behaviors despite their inborn tendencies? If so, surely *one* society in all the world would have been able to preserve the goodness with which children are born. Where is it? Does such a place exist? No, although admittedly some societies are more moral than others. Still, none reflect the harmony that might be expected from the natural-goodness theorists. Why not? Because their basic premise is wrong.

12 **What, then, does this biblical understanding mean for parents? Are they to consider their babies guilty before they have done anything wrong?**

Of course not. Children are not responsible for their sins until they reach an age of accountability—and that time frame is known only to God. On the other hand, parents should not be surprised when rebellious or mischievous behavior occurs. It

will happen, probably by the eighteenth month or before. Anyone who has watched a toddler throw a temper tantrum when she doesn't get her way must be hard pressed to explain how that expression of "innate goodness" got so mixed up! Did her mother or father model the tantrum for her, falling on the floor, slobbering, kicking, crying, and screaming? I would hope not. Either way, the kid needs no demonstration. Rebellion comes naturally to his and her entire generation—although in some individuals it is more pronounced than in others.

For this reason, parents can and must train, mold, correct, guide, punish, reward, instruct, warn, teach, and love their kids during the formative years. Their purpose is to shape that inner nature and keep it from tyrannizing the entire family. Ultimately, however, only Jesus Christ can cleanse it and make it "wholly acceptable" to the Master. This is what the Bible teaches about people, and this is what I firmly believe.




13 Why can't parents get children to obey just by explaining what they want them to do? Why is it so often necessary to punish or raise our voices to get them to cooperate? Why can't they just accept a few reasonable rules and avoid all that conflict? It just doesn't add up to me.

After working with children for years, I'm convinced that their challenging behavior is motivated in part by the desire for power that lies deep within the human spirit. From a very early age, they just don't want anyone telling them what to do. They are also great admirers of strength and courage. Maybe this is why mythical characters like Superman, Robin Hood, and Wonder Woman have been so prominent in the folklore of children. Perhaps it is also why kids brag that "My dad can beat up your dad!" (One child said in reply, "That's nothing; my mom can beat up my dad, too!")

It is a fact that most boys, and some girls, care about the issue of "who's toughest." Whenever a youngster moves into a new neighborhood or a new school district, he often has to fight, either verbally or physically, to establish himself on the hierarchy of strength. There is usually a "top dog" in a group of children, who bosses everyone else around. There is also a little defeated pup at the bottom of the heap, who takes the brunt of everyone's abuse. And each child between those extremes usually knows where he or she ranks in relation to the others.

I believe this admiration for power also makes children want to know how tough their leaders are. They will occasionally disobey adults for the precise purpose of testing their determination and courage. Thus, whether you are a parent or grandparent or Boy Scout leader or bus driver or Brownie leader or schoolteacher, I

can guarantee that sooner or later, one of the children under your authority will clench his little fist and challenge your leadership. He will convey this message by his disobedient manner: "I don't think you are tough enough to make me do what you say." The way you handle that confrontation is being watched closely by every child in the group. Your reaction will determine how soon another occurs and with what intensity it is driven.

 **14 My wife and I have two very strong-willed kids who are hard to handle. They seem to need to test us, and they're the happiest and most contented when we are the toughest on them. Why do they insist on making us growl at them and even punish them more than we'd like to?**

It is curious, isn't it, that some children seem to enjoy fighting with their parents. It's a function of the pugnacious temperament with which they are born. Many kids just like to run things and seem to enjoy picking fights.

There is another factor that is related to a child's sense of security. Let me illustrate it this way. Imagine you're driving a car over the Royal Gorge Bridge in Colorado, which is suspended hundreds of feet above the canyon floor. As a first-time traveler, you're pretty tense as you drive across. It is a scary experience. I knew one little fellow who was so awed by the view over the side of the bridge that he said, "Wow, Daddy! If you fell off of here, it'd kill you constantly!"

Now suppose there were no guardrails on the side of the bridge. Where would you steer the car? Right down the middle of the road. Even though you don't plan to hit those protective railings along the side, you just feel more secure knowing that they're there.

It's the same way with children. There is security in defined limits. They need to know precisely what the rules are and who's available to enforce them. Whenever a strong-willed child senses that the boundaries may have moved, or that his or her parents may have lost their nerve, he or she will often precipitate a fight just to test the limits again. They may not admit that they want you to be the boss, but they breathe easier when you prove that you are.