

## ***Disposition: How it Affects Behavior***

by Burt Segal, LCSW

Riverpoint Psychiatric Associates

Mr. and Mrs. Smith (not their real name) have two sons. One of their boys is well mannered and even-tempered. The other one is very headstrong and difficult to manage. They asked me how this could be, given that the same parents raised both boys, using the same parenting philosophy and techniques. The answer lies in the personality or dispositions of the two children. In my 20 years of clinical experience with children, I have seen that certain children have tendencies to behave in certain ways. For some children these traits are clear from birth or even during the mother's pregnancy. Many times as I am evaluating a child who is extremely active I have asked the mother "How long has your son been this active?" Often the reply is "Since he was in the womb."

These traits are referred to as the child's "disposition" and they include several aspects of behavior. The term "disposition" refers to the individual's general outlook or temperament. Each and every person in this world is unique. We all have our own looks, thoughts, feelings, strengths and weaknesses. We are all born with certain characteristics that make us unique from the very beginning. Our DNA is our genetic and scientific fingerprint. We also have a unique fingerprint to our personality. Although this cannot be measured by medical tests, as can DNA, clearly people have unique dispositions. Some are mostly friendly and some are mostly grumpy. Some people are lighthearted while others are very serious. Each of us has our own perspective and we view the world in our own way. Some babies are easy going, cuddly and enjoy social interaction. Others are fussy, colicky and shy away from people. Disposition includes specific traits that influence behavior such as: impulse control, frustration tolerance, activity level and attention span.

*Impulse control* is a significant factor in children who act out often. This refers to one's ability to think before acting. Many people have sudden urges to do things that are inappropriate. They are able to consider the consequences of their actions and refrain from the inappropriate action. Those who have poor control over their impulses act first and consider the consequences later (if at all). When they want to say or do something they give little forethought to the impact upon others or themselves. They speak out of turn in the classroom, hit their siblings and embarrass their parents with their public behavior. These children often know what they SHOULD do and can tell you what the rules are. Yet, in that split second of decision they are unable to refrain from the negative action.

*Frustration tolerance* relates to the ability to handle disappointment appropriately. This usually occurs when a child HAS to do something they do not want to do or when they CANNOT do something they want to do. Problems with frustration tolerance also typically occur during times of sudden change of plans. Daily issues that present problems for some children are awakening and preparing for school, end of play periods and bedtime. This stopping of one activity and beginning another can be unsettling for children. Most of us have only minor difficulty handling last minute changes. For example, if we plan to attend a

baseball game and a sudden rainstorm cancels it, we express our feelings, “I was really looking forward to that!” and we make new plans. A child with poor frustration tolerance may totally “lose it”- cry, yell, throw objects and demand to go to the ballpark anyway. Sudden changes in schedule or loss of expected privileges are very difficult for these children to manage. They may also give up easily on tasks that are challenging them due to becoming quickly overwhelmed.

*Activity level* refers to the child’s average physical movement. This varies greatly between individuals. Some can sit quietly for hours and others move about constantly, remaining seated only for brief moments. For those with a very high level of movement, a classroom setting can be problematic. These children are sometimes labeled as “hyperactive.” All children who have a high level of activity do not suffer from Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as some people mistakenly believe. Children who display a high level of motor activity are more likely to be seen as “problem kids”. They are more noticeable and require more frequent limits and redirection.

*Attention span* is important not only in school but at home as well. Learning is positively affected by increased attention. Those who concentrate poorly have more difficulty being high achievers. We sometimes mistake problems in learning with attention/concentration problems. Often those who are suspected of having ADHD actually suffer from learning problems. These problems may exist independently or in addition to ADHD. Children may have a short attention span and NOT suffer from ADHD.

If you consider each of these it may help you better understand why children behave the way they do.