

Difficult Temperament and Child Abuse. Notes on the Validity of the Child-effect Model

ANETTE ENGFER (*)

1. INTRODUCTION

Every child is different. Parents with several children would subscribe to that. Noticing the individual differences in their children, they would support the major ideas of a fairly new psychological discipline in the study of child development focussing on such differences, namely *temperament research*. With the growth of temperament research, psychologists have learned the lesson which presumably is a truism to most parents: parent-child relationships are not a one-way street in which parents determine what happens to the child. Instead, individual characteristics of children play an important part in this relationship from the very beginning, in some extreme cases parents may even consider themselves the «victims» of the very difficult behaviour of their children.

This «new look» upon parent-child relationships is fairly young. It was brought about by two sources of thinking: (1) The now classical article by Bell (1968)¹ and (2) the beginning of

temperament research dating back to the publications of the research group around Thomas and Chess (Thomas, Chess, Birch, Hertzig & Korn 1963; Thomas, Chess & Birch 1968)².

This idea shall be illustrated by an example of my own research (see Engfer & Schneewind 1982): In a cross-sectional study about the antecedents and consequences of harsh parental punishment, I found that the most important condition predicting corporal punishment was parent perceived «child difficultness». In other words: parents who disciplined their children by use of physical punishment described their children as being disobedient, aggressive, moody, and irritable, and these parental descriptions corresponded quite well to the way in which these children described themselves in a personality questionnaire. With these correlational data we could not determine, however,

(*) State Institute for Early Education and Family Research, Arabellastrasse 1, 8000 Munich 81, Germany.

¹Bell (1968) advanced the idea of re-interpreting the findings of former socialization studies mainly based on correlational data: child characteristics which so far almost exclusively had been interpreted as consequences of parental behaviour could just as well be seen as their «causes».

²The books by Thomas and co-workers were very influential with their notion that from the very beginning infant (temperament) characteristics have an impact on parent-child relationships and should be considered as an important source of subsequent child behaviour problems. This «new look» upon behavioural characteristics of children as determinants of parent-child relationships differed widely from the «tabula rasa» conceptions of child personality implicit in environmentalistic positions such as classical learning theory or popular psychoanalytic thinking.

whether these «difficult» characteristics of the children were a consequence of the harsh discipline they had experienced or if children displaying such behaviour problems thereby invited physical punishment. As long as such empirical relations between parental behaviour and child characteristics are examined at just one point in time this question has to be left unanswered.

1.1. *The temperament concept of the «difficult child»*

Thomas et al. (1968) used nine dimensions of temperament to describe individual differences between infants. With respect to problems in parent-child relationships, their typological distinction between so-called «easy» and «difficult» children was particularly relevant. In their sample of 141 children studied longitudinally, they classified 40% of the children as «easy», 10% of the children were described as «difficult».

Five temperament dimensions were used to define what constitutes a «difficult» child: (1) negative mood, (2) high intensity of emotional responses, (3) low regularity of biological functions, (4) withdrawal, and (5) poor adaptation to new situations (see also Carey, 1970; Carey & McDevitt, 1978, who developed questionnaires for the assessment of these dimensions).

Over the course of further research, these dimensions for the definition of child-difficultness were challenged for a number of reasons (see Bates, 1989a, b). Consequently, some of these dimensions were dropped, others were added (see also Hagekull, 1989). The most central aspect of difficult child behaviour identified independently of child age is «negative emotionality», i.e. «difficult» children are highly irritable, cry a lot as infants, and exhibit all forms of negative mood later on (see Bates, 1989b; Crockenberg, 1986; Engfer et al., 1987). It makes sense that these child behaviour patterns are rather annoying to parents and as such may constitute a risk factor for subsequent abuse.

As the concept of temperament was introduced to emphasize the impact of child characteristics on the course of parent-child relationships a number of premisses and assumptions were

more or less explicitly made: (1) Temperament characteristics should be observable quite early. Therefore, the concept of temperament was mainly applied to behavioural characteristics of infants and young children. This does not exclude the possibility, however, of applying temperament concepts to school children and to young adults as well (see Keogh, 1989; Lerner et al., 1989); (2) Temperament characteristics are biologically and/or genetically based. This conception of temperament proposed by a number of authors (see the second section of the recently published book by Kohnstamm et al., 1989) does not necessarily imply, however, that these characteristics show temporal stability and cannot be modified by environmental influences. Recent findings about the temperament development of children underscore the notion that the behaviour of parents and other family conditions have an impact on the long-term development of temperament characteristics (see Engfer, 1986a; van den Boom, in press; Belsky, 1991, etc.); (3) In a similar vein, temporal stability was no longer sustained as a prerequisite of temperament concepts. Infant temperament characteristics such as irritability were found to change over the course of the first year in 40% of the children studied by Belsky (1991). In my own longitudinal study, I found comparable changes in ca. 30% of the children (see Engfer, 1986a), and these changes were linked in a plausible way to a number of family conditions (see below, section 4).

In this paper I will not even try to describe the whole range of temperament concepts and related research programs (see here the comprehensive handbook of Kohnstamm et al., 1989). Instead I will first examine the empirical evidence for the notion that child (temperament) characteristics may elicit abusive maltreatment. In a second step I will try to analyse under which conditions child difficultness in terms of intense negative emotionality may affect parenting or may be modified by it.

1.2. *The concept of child abuse*

In Germany it is still common to associate the concept of child abuse with pictures of severely damaged children. This view disregards the fact that child abuse marks the end-point

of a continuum ranging from adequate parental care to intermediate forms of detrimental parent behaviour (such as verbal hostility, frequent use of corporal punishment or withdrawal of love) up to abuse, in extreme cases even to the killing of children.

Parental behaviour in the middle range of this abuse-continuum is much more frequent than extreme abuse. It is usually the outcome of parental helplessness in childrearing and characterizes most parents who seek the help of German child protection centers (see Kinderschutz-Zentrum München, 1989). Extreme forms of abuse are not only relatively rare, but are also steadily decreasing as the court- and police-records of the last ten years in Germany show (see Bulletin, 1987; Engfer, 1986b).

Last, but not least, the parenting difficulties in the middle range of the abuse-continuum can be studied more easily by social scientists as parents are more willing to admit such problems. This is a legitimate approach for two reasons: (1) The boundaries between the frequent use of corporal punishment and physical abuse are fluid-it depends on the vulnerability of the child organism, on the intensity of the hitting, and on situational circumstances whether a child gets hurt or not. (2) Therefore, the conditions associated with less severe abusive behaviour were found to be directly comparable to those predicting more severe forms of abuse (see Engfer, 1986b, 1990, 1991).

In the following section, when examining the relations between child characteristics and child abuse in this broader sense of the term, it should be kept in mind that child maltreatment is not limited to *spectacular* parental behaviours such as frequent punishment, hitting, and yelling. Children can also be maltreated in an *unspectacular* way. If children do not experience somebody who smiles at them, plays with them, takes care of their physical and emotional needs, then they are maltreated in terms of neglect. This form of neglectful maltreatment may not be elicited to the same extent as physical abuse by provocative «difficult» characteristics of children (however, see section 4 below). Characteristics parents reject for other reasons (if children resemble persons they dislike, i.e. the spouse who deserted them, their hated parent etc.) may provoke neglect or it may evolve from

child-independent conditions such as extreme poverty, maternal depression, alcohol or drug abuse which restrain the emotional availability of the mother from the very beginning. This physical and emotional neglect has consequences for the development of children which are *at least* as detrimental as physical abuse (see Erickson et al., 1989).

2. RELATIONS BETWEEN CHILD CHARACTERISTICS AND ABUSE: THE SUBJECTIVE REASONS OF PARENTS

If parents are asked why they beat their children, they usually give reasons directly related to the behaviour of the child. The child does something which parents disapprove of or he/she does not do what they want him/her to do. The things parents disapprove of or want to stop in infants are frequent crying and whining, not sleeping through the night, refusal to eat; later on temper tantrums (often as reaction to parental interventions) or problems with toilet training may elicit parental punishment. If parents set unreasonable standards, expecting their children to function more maturely and cooperatively than their age allows, then they will face an increasing number of reasons to feel annoyed, when children violate these expectations by being noisy, disobedient, by forcefully demanding parental attention, spoiling things, lying etc., etc.. This list could be continued endlessly to include the many sources of friction which may arise between parents and children over the course of their shared development.

Only a few researchers have examined the subjective reasons parents give for their use of harsh punishment. Frude and Goss (1979) found in their reports of mothers of young children that the main instances when mothers felt intense anger and the inclination to hit the child resulted from the coincidence of prolonged infant crying and maternal states of nervous exhaustion.

Kadushin and Martin (1981) describe child abuse as the endpoint of escalating power struggles between parents and children. At the beginning of such recurring episodes the parents try to change child behaviour by use of relatively

adequate control techniques. If children repeatedly do not react at all or react with aggressive defiance, parents will finally «blow their fuse» and beat their children in an outburst of helpless rage.

These descriptions fit accurately the so-called «coercive processes» between helpless parents and their aggressive youngsters observed and described by Patterson (1982). In these coercive processes child disobedience and parental helplessness escalate to such crises that the parents finally beat their children. The harshness of this punishment presumably is the result of the anger and arousal parents feel in that situation. The feelings of their own helplessness and their prior defeat in the attempts to control the child presumably add to it and intensify their actions. With the growing frequency of such coercive cycles, parents start to attribute their own failure and the child's disobedience to malicious intent or to other negative characteristics of the child. Therefore, under the impression of their own helplessness and lack of control, parents will start to think in terms of temperament, as they ascribe the characteristics of a «difficult» temperament to their child.

Children who rarely annoy their parents, who quickly and smoothly change their behaviour according to parental expectations will not easily become victims of such punishments or negative attributions. Therefore, the question has to be asked if there are children with difficult temperaments who provoke such coercive cycles or even abusive behaviour by their parents.

3. WHICH CHILD CHARACTERISTICS ARE EMPIRICALLY RELATED TO HARSH PUNISHMENT AND TO PHYSICAL ABUSE?

All recent theories about the causes of child abuse conceive child characteristics as one of the factors which may increase the risk of abuse (see Belsky & Vondra, 1989; Browne, 1988; Bugental et al., 1989). This notion is based on the findings of many former studies where children identified as victims of abuse were observed to be «atypical» in one way or another. Children born pre-term or with a very low birth-weight, children with mental or physical handicaps, «unwanted» or illegitimate children, and

children presenting special behavioural difficulties to their parents were overrepresented among child abuse victims (see Friedrich & Boriskin, 1976; Engfer, 1986b). While for some of these problems it was difficult to determine if they really preceded abuse or if they presented a consequence of maltreatment, for others this was clear as they could be identified right at birth before the onset of abuse.

Although few of these characteristics qualify as «temperamental» in terms of the temperament concepts described above, some of these — such as pre-term birth — include behavioural characteristics quite in harmony with the description of «child difficultness». It is well documented that compared to full-term babies pre-term children cry much more and their cries have a peculiar high pitch of very aversive quality, they have difficulty adapting to feeding routines, they are less predictable, easily over- or understimulated, they react intensely, and are more frequently ill (see Rauh, 1984).

Since mothers of pre-terms have to cope with the disappointment of having given birth to an immature child, since they feel excluded from the caretaking of the baby as long as the child is cared for in the intensive care unit, and if they also have to live with the fear that they may still lose their baby, then the starting point for the development of the mother-child relationship is rather unfortunate. Therefore, the hypothesis was quite plausible that pre-term children are at special risk for subsequent abuse.

The empirical evidence substantiating this hypothesis is less clear-cut, however. While in some studies pre-term birth was found to be associated with subsequent abuse (see e.g. Hunter et al., 1978; Lynch & Roberts, 1977), other studies could not substantiate this relation (see Starr et al., 1982; Egeland & Vaughn, 1981; Altemeier et al., 1982).

Likewise, the additional hypothesis suggested by Lynch and Roberts (1977) that not the condition of pre-term birth alone but rather the interruption of the bonding-process is causative for subsequent abuse could not be substantiated by subsequent research findings (see Egeland & Vaughn, 1981). Therefore, neither perinatal risks nor the caretaking arrangements on the maternity ward present a sufficient explanation of child abuse (for a more detailed discussion of

these issues, see Engfer, 1986b, pp. 87 ff.).

These inconsistent findings have to do with the fact that in these more recent studies the impact of pre-term status for the prediction of child abuse was investigated prospectively, i.e. children born prematurely were observed longitudinally from birth on and their development was compared to matched control groups of healthy, full-term babies. In contrast, the older studies had compared the proportion of pre-term babies among child abuse victims with their prevalence in the general population. This approach was misleading as the clinical samples of victimized children not only differed by their pre-term status, but also by many other conditions known to be associated with child maltreatment such as the very young age of mothers, illegitimate birth, lack of adequate health care, chronic poverty, and other family stressors. This led to an overestimation of the impact of pre-term status on subsequent abuse.

For comparable methodological reasons prospectively designed studies produced equivocal support for the hypothesis that children with a «difficult temperament» are at special risk for abuse. In three of these studies (see Funke-Furber, 1979; Altemeier et al., 1979; Egeland & Brunnuquell, 1979) infant characteristics were assessed by use of the Neonatal Assessment Scale (NBAS, see Brazelton, 1973). Only the study by Egeland and Brunnuquell (1979) revealed that subsequently abused children were more irritable and less consolable as neonates, while in the other studies no such relations were found.

In some of these studies the temperament characteristics of the children were also assessed by use of the Infant Temperament Questionnaire (ITQ) by Carey (1970). Here only the research group around Altemeier found that subsequently maltreated children were described as more «difficult» at age three months by their mothers (see Vietze et al., 1979).

Two recent German prospective studies likewise found no relations between neonatal characteristics as assessed on the maternity ward and subsequent caretaking problems such as rejection and/or neglect (see Laucht, 1990) or the frequent use of corporal punishment (see Engfer, 1990, 1991). Laucht (1990) also found

no differences between maltreated and control children concerning perinatal risks.

But as early as three to four months after delivery some differences emerged. The children experiencing maternal rejection and neglect in the study by Laucht (1990) showed a number of characteristics resembling the description of a «difficult temperament»: these children cried longer and more intensely, they were less predictable in their biological rhythm, presented more problems in adapting to feeding routines, reacted fearfully to new situations, and were socially less responsive. At age two these children displayed the following behaviour problems: problems with sleeping through, temper tantrums, disobedience and intense fear of strangers (see Weindrich & Löffler, 1990).

These findings are quite in harmony with the results of my own prospective longitudinal study about child characteristics preceding the frequent use of corporal punishment (see Engfer, 1990, 1991). The abusive treatment of these children usually began in their second year. Prior to these escalating conflicts the mothers described these children at four months as highly irritable, as frequently crying, and as difficult to soothe. Eight months after delivery these children were observed as being far more unhappy, moody, and whiny than their well-treated counterparts in interaction with their mothers. 18 months after delivery the mothers complained mainly about their restlessness, moodiness and general «difficultness». And the negative descriptions of these children continued up to the age of 43 months and 6,3 years when they were perceived by their mothers as being aggressive, disobedient, in a clingy way dependent of maternal help and attention, much less persistent than the children of the control group.

Summarizing these findings, the conclusion appears warranted that temperament characteristics of neonates do not allow prediction of subsequent abuse. In contrast, there may be some predictive relations between the problems mothers have with their babies three to four months after delivery and subsequent maltreatment in terms of rejection, neglect and/or the use of corporal punishment. These empirical relations emerging later on make it difficult to decide, however, whether they are «caused» by temperament characteristics of the children, by

maternal caretaking or by other conditions simultaneously affecting the course of the mother-child relationship. (1) If neonatal characteristics are not related to subsequent maltreatment this does not necessarily exclude the possibility that genetically determined temperament characteristics have an influence on the course of the mother-child relationships. Although this genetic influence may not be manifest in the neonatal period where child behaviour is highly unstable, it may unfold its influence over time. As Bates (1989a, p. 7) stated «genes might turn on and off at different times over the course of development» and it may well be that the «difficultness» of children can be recognized only after some time. (2) The second possibility that these «difficult» child characteristics were mainly the outcome of inadequate maternal care cannot easily be discarded. In our own study we found mother perceived child difficultness to be far more closely related to maternal than to child characteristics (see Engfer, 1986a). Specifically, for the prediction of child difficultness at 4 and 18 months the maternal characteristic of insensitive caretaking as assessed on the maternity ward and 8 months after delivery was far more important than child characteristics observed at the same points in time. This lack of sensitivity was found also to be related to maternal personality characteristics and child-related feelings indicative of emotional instability and a rigid, power assertive approach to child care (see Engfer & Gavranidou, 1987). Therefore mothers exhibiting such characteristics may have contributed to the increasing «difficultness» of their children or at least their perception of «child difficultness» was closely linked to their own psychological characteristics. These same characteristics may have effected their increasing problems in dealing with the child which eventually even led to the use of corporal punishment. These assumptions are quite in harmony with the findings of the comprehensive, methodologically exemplary prospective study of the research group around Egeland (see Egeland & Brunnuquell, 1979; Pianta et al., 1989) who ascribe the critical role in the occurrence of child abuse to maternal characteristics. This view is also in line with the assumptions by Belsky and Vondra (1989) that in the hierarchy of resources which parents can utilize for the tasks of competent

caretaking their personal resources are of primary importance. (3) This view of maternal characteristics as crucial for both the prediction of child difficultness and maltreatment does not, however, imply that these mothers should be blamed for their caretaking problems. The findings of our own study underscore the notion that these maltreating mothers were just as much victims of unfortunate circumstances as their children were. Specifically, these mothers suffered from serious impairments of their emotional and physical well-being as they were chronically ill, depressive, and without support from their husbands as their marital relationship was severely distressed, in half of the cases even violent. Therefore, it looks as if these mothers lacked the resources to cope with the difficult temperament of their children and this holds true irrespective of the question whether these child characteristics were truly «temperamental» or an outcome of these unfortunate circumstances.

Therefore, an «interactional» or transactional view of child temperament and maltreatment appears most convincing to me: child difficultness will become a risk factor for maltreatment only if parents lack the personal and social resources to cope with the temperamental difficulties of their children. Child characteristics may then assume a triggering role for abuse which otherwise would be unlikely to occur. This notion is supported by the findings of Browne and Saqi (1988) that prediction of child abuse in high risk populations was not possible from risk indicators present prenatally or at birth. Only if such risk conditions coincided with the specific problems mothers experienced in caring for their «difficult» babies, then child abuse was likely to occur.

In other words: mothers who are healthy and emotionally stable, who live in a harmonious and supportive marital relationship, and who can utilize the help from relatives, friends or institutions to escape at least occasionally from the exhausting situation of caring for an inconsolable child, such mothers can compensate more easily for the less than optimal characteristics of their babies and will be protected from the development of abusive childrearing strategies (see also section 4 below).

The question remains, however, how many of these resources are required to ensure parental coping capabilities, whether there is the hierarchy

of resources postulated by Belsky and Vondra (1989), and related to that, to what extent the lack of one or more resources can be compensated for by others (see also Belsky, 1991).

4. DIFFICULT CHILD TEMPERAMENT AND PARENTING: SOME DIFFERENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS

So far only the relations between child difficultness and physical abuse were discussed. The findings were somewhat inconsistent. At best, they lent support to the view that child difficultness may trigger abusive behaviour, if it coincides with other risk factors and with limited personal and social coping resources of parents. In the following section I will go a step further and examine the empirical evidence for the notion that child difficultness may determine the course of parenting.

At first I would like to question the notion that parental anger and abuse are the only and most likely responses to a crying child. Doesn't it make just as much sense to expect that parents initially will attend to and try to soothe a crying baby? If such attempts fail and the child continuously cries in an inconsolable way, then parents will feel helpless and frustrated. Anger and physical punishment may be one way to deal with this situation, but fortunately, very few parents react in this way. Another way to deal with this frustrating situation could be resignation and withdrawal from the child. Therefore, difficult child behaviour may elicit a whole variety of positive or negative responses from parents or no response at all, depending on the point in time at which parents' coping with the crying baby is observed, and depending also on their prior experiences of success and failure in consoling the child.

Although the empirical evidence about the impact of child difficultness on parenting by and large is just as inconclusive as the findings concerning child temperament and abuse some studies show that mothers initially try very hard to soothe their babies. Only if their attempts remain ineffective because the babies prove inconsolable do they resign and withdraw from their babies (for excellent reviews of these studies see Crockenberg, 1986; van den Boom, 1988).

But not all mothers react in this way. The study of van den Boom (in press) revealed the following individual patterns in the course of mothering: the majority of the mothers in her sample withdrew from their highly irritable infants within the first four months; however, a small group of mothers were so sensitive and competent in their caretaking skills that they were able to change their babies into «easy» and socially responsive children.

Van den Boom (in press) chose the unique approach of selecting a group of highly irritable babies as assessed with the Neonatal Assessment Scale by Brazelton (1973) and observing very closely the course of the mother-child relationship over the span of several months. Presumably, the relations between child temperament and maternal behaviour will be revealed only if children show these extreme degrees of difficultness. Similar findings were reported by Lee and Bates (1985) who mainly for extreme groups found these empirical relations between infant difficultness, initial maternal withdrawal and a coercive style of parenting at age 4. Thus, these empirical findings could be interpreted as supporting Buss and Plomin's (1984) theory of the relation between temperament and environment which argues that «those in the middle range of any temperament dimension are more likely to be influenced by the environment, while those at the high extremes are likely to alter the environment» (cit. from Crockenberg 1986, p. 66).

The next question that has to be asked concerns the characteristics of mothers who are able to change their formerly «difficult» babies into easy ones. In this dynamic and developmental perspective, the empirical relations between maternal behaviour and child difficultness as assessed at one point in time are not examined. Instead, the focus is on patterns of change in child behaviour to identify the conditions associated with growth or decline in child difficultness.

My own longitudinal study (Engfer, 1986a) brought the following findings. Compared to the mothers who described their babies as consistently difficult between 4 and 18 months, those mothers who found their babies initially difficult but easy later on had the following characteristics: there were more primiparous

mothers initially suffering from the strains of a difficult delivery and their relative inexperience in the maternal role. But these mothers were observed as caring sensitively for their babies at 8 months, and over the course of time, when their well-being had been restored and they had gained self-confidence in their maternal role, they found their children increasingly easy.

Different characteristics emerged for those mothers who found their babies initially easy, but difficult later on. Compared with the mothers who found their children consistently easy they were a little bit older and felt relatively healthy and stable shortly after an uncomplicated delivery. However, over the course of time their distressed marital relationship and quarrels with their spouse and in-laws may have contributed to the fact that they found their babies increasingly difficult. These mothers were also less sensitive in the caretaking of their babies and endorsed more rigid and power assertive attitudes in relationship with their child, and — as described above in section 3 — these maternal characteristics were most relevant for the prediction of child difficultness over the course of time.

These findings stem from an intensive longitudinal study with a very small ($N=39$) sample of German families. Therefore, it is somewhat surprising that these findings are basically in harmony with the results of other longitudinal studies conducted with much larger samples in the United States and Canada (see Washington et al., 1986; Matheny, 1986; Belsky, 1991). In these other studies it was found as well that emotionally stable, sensitive mothers could compensate for the initial difficultness of their babies, while in the context of a distressed marriage or disharmonious family climate children developed increasing «difficultness».

5. CONCLUSIONS AND CONSEQUENCES FOR CLINICAL PRACTICE

Concerning our initial question whether child characteristics are causative factors in child abuse, the answer is anything but easy. It all depends. First, it depends on whom we ask: if we ask parents, they will say «yes», as the analyses of Kadushin and Martin (1981) have

shown. If we ask research psychologists, their answers will be more complex.

Secondly, it will depend on the way we conceptualize «causes» of child abuse. If we analyze the events preceding a violent act by parents in a molecular way as Patterson (1982) or Kadushin and Martin (1981) have done, then child behaviour may qualify as triggering abuse. However, if we define the «causes» of abuse in a more molar way, then it is unlikely that child characteristics are a sufficient cause for abusive parenting. The temperamental difficulty of children will become a risk factor for abuse only if parents lack the personal and social resources allowing them to cope with or to modify the irritable behaviour of their children.

Thirdly, the evidence of some recent studies about the impact of child irritability on parenting suggests the following notions: (a) The relations between infant difficulty and maternal behaviour may be discernible only if child difficultness is expressed at an extreme degree. (b) We have to choose a dynamic view of the way in which parents respond to these problems: while almost all parents will initially try to console a crying baby, they may eventually cease to try if they repeatedly experience their own inefficiency and helplessness in doing so. Although this helplessness and frustration may be expressed by some parents in violence, the much more likely reaction may be resignation and withdrawal from interaction with the child.

However, this emotional unavailability of mothers may have the long-term consequences of endowing some children with anxious attachment relationships which in some cases at later points in time may lead to negativism, disobedience, and related behaviour problems so that the children subsequently may become targets of abuse. This proposed transactional sequence of child behaviour and parenting is still rather speculative and supported by just a few studies observing the long-term development of children under different conditions of maltreatment (see Crittenden, 1988; Erickson et al., 1989; Browne & Saqi, 1988)). The findings by Lee and Bates (1985) and by van den Boom (1988) could also be interpreted as support for this hypothesis.

Summing up it looks as if child difficultness in infancy may set the stage for an unfortunate course of parent-child relationships including

abusive behaviour at a later point in time. However, child difficultness will have this impact only in conjunction with other risk conditions which limit the personal and social resources of parents.

Even if difficult child temperament qualifies as only *one* factor among others in the explanation of child abuse, this factor may be very important for preventive purposes, mainly for two reasons:

First, as the study by Browne and Saqi (1988) has shown, accurate prediction of child abuse risk was not possible from risk factors excluding mother-perceived difficulties with her child. Therefore, under the aspect of costs and efficiencies of programs for secondary prevention of child abuse, this risk factor may enable a more accurate identification of families really in the need of help.

Secondly, in general pediatric practice mothers presumably can admit their caretaking problems much more easily if they are allowed to describe them in terms of difficult child behaviour. Therefore, descriptions of child characteristics may be a door-opener for the disclosure of other problems these mothers may have. For these mothers it may likewise be a relief to hear that there is such a thing as a difficult temperament and that the irritability of their baby is not their fault. Even if there are some «super»-mothers who are able to cope with and modify the behaviour of their «cry-babies» those mothers who cannot play that role because of their own limited resources should not be blamed for it. Instead it makes much more sense to offer help and support to mothers facing this problem. Programs geared specifically to the problems of caring for so-called «cry-babies» have been developed in the United States (see Weissbluth, 1984, 1989), the United Kingdom (see Gray, 1987), and the Netherlands (van den Boom 1988).

Concerning the prevention of child abuse all practitioners (pediatricians, nurses, social workers etc.) having to do with mothers in the first months and years after the birth of a child should be alarmed if they find maternal depressions, ill health, relationship problems coinciding with reports about the inconsolable crying

of their babies. Then it would not be the task to determine whether these mothers already maltreat their children. Instead every form of support should be offered to them prior to the actual onset of abuse.

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ABSTRACT³

The author first defines two concepts: «child abuse» and «difficult child». After, the authors examines the empirical evidence for the notion that child temperamental characteristics may elicit abusive maltreatment. In a second step she try to analyse under which conditions child difficulties in terms of intense negative emotionality may affect parenting or may be modified by it. A note on the consequences for clinical practice is included.

RESUMO

Neste artigo, a autora começa por definir dois conceitos: o de criança difícil como um aspecto temperamental e o conceito de criança maltratada. De seguida, são discutidos dois temas centrais: até que ponto as características da criança contribuem para que ela venha a ser maltratada; e em que condições uma criança difícil, em termos da emocionalidade negativa intensa, pode afectar o comportamento dos pais ou ser por ele modificado. Inclui uma nota sobre as consequências destes aspectos na prática clínica.

³ Editor's Abstract.