

Study: Difficult babies can grow into excellent students

Researchers say warmth, parenting skills crucial to outcome

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Parents of difficult babies can now have hope that their children won't grow up to be poor students.

A new study done by researchers at the Indiana University School of Education have found that difficult infants can grow into excellent students, provided they're cared for with excellent parenting skills.

Researchers followed some 1,300 infants from birth through the completion of first grade, and found that even the babies deemed difficult could eventually overcome struggles to become fine students.

"The results were kind of unexpected," professor Anne Dopkins Stright said. "The really difficult babies, the ones crying a lot, or not adapting to new routines or foods, if they had good, top-quality parenting, they actually did the best through the first grade."

The study's results were published in the January/February issue of Child Development. It was done by Stright, education professor Ken Kelley and University of North Carolina professor Kate Gallagher.

While Stright had originally thought their results might have shown the "easiest" babies would have done the best in school, she was surprised to find the opposite was true.

She said the study could be the most elaborate study of child development ever done.

Parents with difficult infants can learn a lot from the study, Stright said.

"In the study, we found that parenting was important for all the babies, even the easy ones," she said. "It's definitely an important finding that parenting makes a difference."

Mothers were asked to describe their child's temperament when the child was 6 months old, with the researchers then observing the parenting skills from that point forward.

It was the mothers' warmth and compassion toward their children that seemed to make the most difference.

"Good parenting, what that means, is whether the mother was warm to her child from infancy to childhood, warm and loving," Stright said. "Then, good parenting was described as whether she used appropriate controls for the child's age. When they got to be a toddler and the mother needed to use some kind of discipline, was she too harsh or too lenient?"

Parents of difficult children might believe they're in for a struggle during later years, but the study found that wasn't true.

The moral of the study: If parents provide good disciplinary action, while maintaining a warm, compassionate relationship, the child can do at least as well as infants who are easier on their parents.

Stright said it was important for parents with difficult babies not to give up on them so easily, and that their behavioral patterns as infants won't necessarily dictate their scholastic performance later in life.