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opening extract from

It's Not Fair: Parenting your Bright and Challenging Child

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IT'S NOT FAIR!

**Parenting Your Bright and
Challenging Child**

**GILL HINES and
ALISON BAVERSTOCK**



1

THE BASICS

What Is a ‘Bright and Challenging Child’?

CHAPTER SNAPSHOT

This chapter will help you to understand what we mean by the term ‘bright and challenging child’ (or B&C child for short) and the typical behavioural and personality traits that this might encompass. It will also make it easier for you to recognise some of the reasons why your child might develop these traits, so you can work with them where needed in order to channel their energies in a more positive direction. This way they won’t face additional difficulties as they approach their teenage years. This chapter will also give you an idea of the issues that the book as a whole is discussing, as well as the tools you will need to identify those which are of importance to you and your child.

Spotting the ‘bright and challenging’ child

A bright and challenging child is smart, sassy and sparky, with just a hint of precociousness. At best, they have an unshakeable self-belief; at worst, a touch of arrogance.

While they do have many positive qualities, and will

probably be very successful in their chosen paths in life, bright and challenging children can be both difficult to parent and exhausting to teach, due to their confident belief that they are cleverer and more capable than the rest of us. And although this is, in some cases, undoubtedly true, they are at risk because – as much as they don't want to admit it – they don't understand the world we live in, the nuances of human nature or the dangers of modern life anywhere near as well as we older and wiser folk do.

It is for this very reason that these children can be hard to parent. You know best about many things, but your child won't accept guidance, advice or restrictions from you, unless you can prove them wrong. And, as they are hardly ever wrong in their own eyes, this is an arduous task and an endless, thankless battle.

No wonder then that many parents of B&C children eventually let them go their own way with fingers crossed and fear in their hearts, far sooner than less headstrong siblings would be encouraged to do. This may mean that they lose their way or even enter into risky behaviours as they go all out to prove that they are the pack leaders who push back the boundaries from a young age. It is not uncommon to hear of such children going all-night clubbing as young as thirteen or fourteen, or taking an unsupervised holiday with friends at fourteen or fifteen. They often choose to be with older young people too, so may be more likely than others to get into age-inappropriate activities before their peers. All of this makes the B&C child remarkably vulnerable to exploitation and abuse as well as exposing them to many of the pitfalls of modern-day youth, only without the skills or maturity needed to handle them.

Recognising the bright and challenging child

While all children are, of course, different, there are many traits and behaviours which, if appearing all together or to a pronounced degree, might lead you to identify a child as bright and challenging. If you find that your child often outsmarts you or you frequently just don't know how to deal with a particular situation because they manage to 'wrong-foot' you, we would say you probably have a B&C child on your hands.

Essentially, we believe that it's a 'gut feeling' – if it seems to fit, the chances are it does – but here are some of the characteristics to look out for:

1. They are verbally able

The B&C child can usually express him or herself very well. They are able to verbalise tricky concepts and ideas and may use words and wordplay to try and trip up the rest of the world. They may even try and 'score points' with their clever linguistic skills, twisting meaning in everyday conversation.

Example

When asked (for the third time) to tidy her room, eight-year-old Martha replies: 'Only last week you were telling me to get more exercise and fresh air – now when I want to do as I'm told you go and tell me to go indoors and tidy my room.'

2. They won't accept boundaries as fixed

They demand the right to negotiate everything – every time. So routines such as bedtime or mealtimes become everyday battles, as they try to get the rules changed to suit their needs.

Example

Nine-year-old Luke at his set bedtime says, 'I'm not tired at all, and if I go to bed now I won't sleep and I won't get tired either because I'm not using any energy – my brain will just go whirr, whirr. If I just play this a bit more then I'll be much more tired and in the end I'll sleep more anyway.'

3. They have to win

No matter what they are doing the B&C child just has to win at it. They have to prove that they are cleverer, faster, clearer-thinking and all-round superior to everyone else. This can be particularly tiresome if you have more than one such child in the family (or, heaven help you, a B&C partner!).

Furthermore, a B&C child may simply not co-operate or participate if they don't feel they can win. Younger children may well sulk or throw a tantrum every time something comes along that means they will not be able to shine.

Example

Eight-year-old Rufus is at a family party where children aged three to twelve are present. He refuses to join in the running races and will only participate in the four-a-side football game if the two oldest boys are in his team.

4. Keen to challenge

The B&C child never takes what you say at face value. They want proof. It is not uncommon to hear them say something like, 'How do you know that?' when presented with a fact, particularly if that fact is being used to back up something you are asking them to do. They will also challenge your authority to ask them to do whatever it is in the first place.

This may be particularly obvious when there is a step-parent involved whose authority is constantly questioned.

Example

At the dinner table, ten-year-old Carlotta is told to eat her broccoli because it's good for her. 'How do you know it's good for me?' she asks. 'I mean, for all you know, I have a hidden broccoli allergy and one day I might die from it. And anyway, it's not fair you telling me what to eat because you don't let me tell you what to eat.'

5. Easily bored

The B&C child's sharp mind likes to be stimulated at all times. This means they can easily become bored and expect as a right that you will give them your undivided attention and help them to find something to do. A bored child can easily become a catalyst for sibling rows and fights too, all of which will be your fault for not having helped them to get un-bored.

Some children can seem quite rude when their attention lapses mid-conversation, and adults from outside the immediate circle may be quite judgemental of the child who switches off or states, simply, 'I'm bored', in a loud voice while the adult is talking. (Ask any teacher!)

Example

Eight-year-old Shapla has been happily reading in her room all morning. She has been deaf to all attempts to engage her in any activity, including an outing to the park on her bike or a trip to town shopping, with the promise of lunch in a café. 'I'm bored,' she says. 'Why is it so boring in this family? We never do anything fun. I wish it was a school day. School is boring but not as boring as home.'

6. They know which of your buttons to push for maximum impact

The B&C child seems to know instinctively how to get you in their power. Whether it's pushing your guilt button, your anger button, your sympathy button or your embarrassment button, they can do it in one blow. Because they are clever and verbally able it is easy for them. They have watched you and unconsciously worked out your weaknesses. They will do whatever they need to get their own way, with few qualms about doing so, however much you squirm.

Example

Eight-year-old Edward has just been told that he can't go and play at a friend's house today as Mum is too busy to take him. 'Too busy? You're always too busy. I don't know why you had me if you are so busy. You had time to talk to Anna on the phone this morning and to go shopping. You're only too busy to do what I want.'

You should now have a better idea of whether or not your child fits the bright and challenging mould. If, however, you still need more help deciding, take the time to complete the short questionnaire at the end of this chapter.

Pros and cons of the bright and challenging child

It's not all bad, and there are many positive aspects to the B&C child.

- They think for themselves
- They are often very funny and good company
- They give you lots to think about and plenty to talk about

- They can be very stimulating
- Keeping up with them can help you to develop new skills and learn new things
- There are lots of times when they make you proud
- They keep you on your toes – and while they may not stop you getting old, they certainly keep you active and involved
- They are interested – they want to learn, though not always about the things you think they should!

However, there are also many difficulties to overcome when parenting the B&C child:

- Explanations are always required, as well as constant reaffirmation of boundaries
- Dealing with them is so tiring, because you are never finished, the boxes are never all ticked
- They can be superior and tend towards arrogance
- Their constant questioning can be undermining
- They are not restful – literally, because they don't sleep much, but also, they are not relaxing company
- You worry about them: they may have trouble interacting socially with peers, or their general wilfulness and inclination towards risk can be a concern
- They are inclined to be sarcastic, which can be catching within a family
- Their immense confidence can be worrying when you see what is coming, but they don't
- They are not good at *not* succeeding and can be quite thrown by (and turn nasty on) failure
- They take up a lot of attention, which can be hard on other children and partners, as well as yourself

- They tend not to learn from mistakes – because they don't accept that they have made any. This leaves them inclined to blame others, which can cause problems and arguments
- The family can seem more harmonious without them around; this in turn sometimes leads to feelings of guilt

The bright and challenging child – a new phenomenon?

Many parents want to know if bright and challenging children are born or grow that way – in other words, is it nature or nurture that makes them what they are? The simple answer is that these children have been around for ever, but perhaps in past generations they would have had some of their personality traits rigorously suppressed. Modern parenting styles, on the other hand, have supported a growth in numbers of the children who fit our profile: today's parents tend to be more permissive, encouraging a child's personality to flourish, sometimes at the cost of important elements of socialisation. So there is a combination of factors at work:

**Intelligence + Personality + Parenting
= Bright and Challenging Children**

Of course, there are many variables within each of these 'components', but there does seem to be a specific mixture of traits which, when added together, makes a child what they are.

Firstly, these children are naturally bright. Whether they do well at school academically is neither here nor there; it is

their quick minds and ability to read people and situations succinctly that makes them ‘bright’ in this context.

We’ve already looked at some of the features of the bright and challenging child, but let’s now consider the parenting methods most commonly associated with them:

- Encouraging negotiation at an early age by giving complex reasons why things should, or should not be done. This leads the child to understand that if they can break down the argument, they can change the ‘rules’ (and too often they can)
- Weak or shifting boundaries – saying ‘No’, then giving in to their questions or arguments
- Overcompensating – giving in to a child’s demands or trying too hard to please them due to guilt or insecurity about your parenting or the time you have to give them
- Wanting to be seen as ‘fair’ or as a ‘best friend’, which can make it difficult to say ‘No’
- Misreading their facility with language and believing that they are wiser than they are
- Encouraging children to argue and be more assertive
- Confusing intelligence with maturity
- Being tired and apathetic – this is particularly applicable if the B&C child is born later on in the family

This book will help you to identify ways in which changing your parenting could help your child change their behaviour. We certainly don’t want to alter their personality or their intelligence – both are to be cherished and encouraged – but by reining them in while they are young enough for you to do so, you may prevent a lot of problems and potential dangers in the future.

Quiz: identifying the bright and challenging child

You may have already made your decision based on what you've read so far, but, if you are still unsure, this quick quiz may help you make your mind up.

	Usually or always	Some- times	Not often or never
1. When asked to do something they don't want to do, they give logical and reasoned arguments for why they should not be asked to do it.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. When playing with other children they are very bad losers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. They know how to make you feel guilty and they do so when it suits them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. They refuse to participate in things they will not be able to shine at.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. They are unkind or boastful with less able/younger siblings or friends.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. They make observations and comments that seem very sophisticated for their years.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. They can be great fun to be with and have a sharp and keen observational humour.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. When having one-to-one time with you they seem to change completely and are compliant, friendly, cheerful and good company.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. There are areas, hobbies or interests at which they excel.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. They don't accept your right to tell them what to do.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Scoring

Score 1 point for each time you have answered ‘Not often or never’.

Score 2 points for each time you have answered ‘Sometimes’.

Score 3 points for each time you have answered ‘Usually or always’.

0–15 points

They are probably challenging at times in the way that all children can be and you’ll know yourself or from school if they are bright but they are probably not the child we are calling ‘bright and challenging’ in this book. You may still find plenty of useful ideas and tips here to help you parent.

15–23 points

Well, they are certainly what we call ‘bright and challenging’. The good news is that they are either still quite young or you have developed good coping strategies already – or both. We think we still have plenty to offer in terms of supporting you as your child grows with ideas, techniques and reassurance.

23–30 points

You really didn’t need to do the quiz did you? Of course you have a bright and challenging child. In fact, your life is probably dominated by them when you are together. This book will help, reassure, prompt and guide you through new ways of parenting them that might make both you and your child more content as they grow into their teens.

So, where do you begin?

Well, the first thing to do is to recognise whether you have a bright and challenging child or not.

Next, accept that parenting them is going to be hard work at times and an ongoing process, but it is also going to be a tremendous learning experience, a source of great joy, entertainment and pleasure too. All parents feel proud of their children, but when you realise how far they have come and that you have helped them to make those steps one by one, you are also allowed to be a little proud of yourself.

You have to remember your child's need to win at all times, which will also mean accepting that rows and name-calling may follow any attempt to change their power tactics. Also, that they have a short route to what upsets you, and will push whichever button is necessary to achieve what they want. It's important to remember that regardless of how upset they – and you – may get, saying 'No' is not going to harm them. Rather, it is a way to slow down their headlong rush into the worst kind of independence – the kind that takes no notice of anyone else and lacks the requisite life skills to do well.

There is a world of difference between just being a parent and actively parenting. Good parenting is hard work and takes time. It comes without pay, the end results are not apparent for years and there is some recognition but not much, so although you may get thanked one day, we wouldn't bank on it.

This may be tough to read, but it sums up why so many people choose the easy option of peace and harmony over doing what will help their children become well-rounded adults. No doubt there will be times when it all seems too difficult, but there will be others when seeing the changes in them will give you enough of a boost to keep going.

Positive feedback from others is also a great reward, so don't be afraid to ask for some. Partners, teachers, siblings and friends will all notice the changes as they happen.

Through it all, you'll probably have to work on your own self-esteem at times, so you don't feel threatened by the

challenges ahead or dragged down by the effort of change. You will need to believe that it's worth the struggle when things are tough and to keep reminding yourself that letting your child have their own way all the time is actually harmful to them – even if in the short term it brings peace and calm.

Questions and answers

Q. *My ten-year-old son is streets ahead of his classmates in almost all his schoolwork; he is able to make sensible decisions and choices about how he spends his time and we almost never have to talk to him about his behaviour. He tends to stay up on the computer late at night but we consider this to be his prerogative, as it certainly isn't affecting his performance at school. He doesn't take much notice of his younger sister, so doesn't argue much with her. In fact, he's no problem at all as long as he's treated in a mature and adult fashion. Why on earth should I try and change him?*

A. No one is saying you should. If you're all happy with the status quo then you are very fortunate indeed and we wish you well. Many parents would envy you as they pick up yet another wet towel from the bathroom floor or follow the trail of dirty football kit all over the house. My only concern would be on the nature and purpose of childhood and whether your son is actually having the childhood that will help him become a well-rounded adult.

You say nothing of friends and play, nothing of fun and mischief, nothing of learning to explore and manage emotions. All of these things have their place in a child's life, and, in our opinion, without them the child is missing out on some of the key experiences needed to learn and grow.

Have a look at the quiz on page 16 and answer it

honestly. Then maybe you can answer your question for yourself one way or the other.

Q. *My eight-year-old daughter is a nightmare. She rules over the house like a queen and tells everyone what to do and how to do it. She throws real temper tantrums like a three-year-old when she doesn't get her own way about even the smallest thing, like what to watch on the TV, and she has everyone tiptoeing around her. The school say she's pretty much the same there too, although she's clever and gets on with her work well. She is fine when everything goes her way, and she can be the life and soul of the family – our little Princess. We love her to bits, but I worry that she's going to get totally out of control when she gets older. We've tried to talk to her about her behaviour but she says she understands, then behaves in exactly the same way next time. What can we do to get her to see that she can't have her own way all the time?*

A. Your daughter sounds like the classic bright and challenging child – particularly as she is still only eight years old! You are right to be concerned for the future – she has the potential to become a very difficult and unlikeable teenager and life might become quite hard for her in later life unless she changes.

However, it's not just her that has to change. It's you as well. She is simply reacting to the way in which she has been raised and will continue to do so, unless something shifts radically. You must stop calling her 'Princess', for a start – it usually means a girl who gets away with murder, and she has to stop getting away with quite a lot of things.

You need to spell out for her what she can and can't do, and make sure she is rewarded with lots of attention and smiles when she gets it right, as well as being given clear sanctions and the withdrawal of attention and smiles when she chooses to behave badly. She has to learn through con-

sistent approval/disapproval, backed up by exclusion from the family unit when she fails to show respect for it by breaking the accepted code of behaviour.

You'll find much to help you in this book and her school should be able to help too, if you ask them for their support. Change can be painful and it might require some serious soul-searching on your part to look at why you have parented your daughter in the way that you have and how it feels when you do it differently and upset her.

But just remember that in the end she will be a better, more socialised and more likeable person for it all. If you learn to put your foot down, show her your feelings – not just 'reason' – and let her take some responsibility for her behaviour and its impact, things will change quite dramatically.