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For Difficult Kids, Choice Of Care Can Bring Rewards

Dorothy Flint knew soon after her son William was born that she had a difficult child. He cried often and nursed nonstop. He slept so poorly that Ms. Flint took him on midnight drives in the car to calm him. He had separation anxiety so severe that she rarely left him. “He was really a tough baby,” says the Crofton, Md., mother.

Later she found a silver lining. Ms. Flint took pains to choose an excellent child-care center for William, now 4, and he quickly surpassed other kids, sharing his toys and learning classroom rules. He wins praise from his teacher for his social skills. As high-maintenance as William was, Ms. Flint says, he has also been high-reward.

Working parents struggling with difficult children—marked by excessive crying, fussiness, emotional volatility, fear of strangers and clinginess—often worry about how they will fare in child care. Research has shown that sensitive, vulnerable kids can be at higher risk of problems later if they’re mistreated or face other adversity early.

But new studies are discovering an upside: these difficult babies also have a significantly higher chance of surpassing other kids later if placed in the right kind of child care. The findings offer new guidance for parents in predicting how child care is likely to affect a child.




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It’s a no-brainer, of course, that high-quality child care is important. But the latest studies tease out the disproportionate impact that quality care has on the most difficult, vulnerable children—the “high-cost, high-benefit” kids, says Jay Belsky, co-author of several papers on the topic and a psychology professor at Birkbeck University of London.

Learning of the research, Ms. Flint termed it a welcome change from the usual feedback: “Sorry, you’ve got a really grumpy baby, good luck.”

One study, to be published in *Developmental Psychology*, tracked 968 children from infancy through 11 years, gauging their temperament, the quality of child care through age 5, and development through sixth grade. Children with difficult temperaments, who were later placed in high-quality care, had fewer behavioral problems and teacher conflicts and better reading skills



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by sixth grade, compared with easygoing children in similar care, says the study, co-authored by Dr. Belsky. Those placed in poor-quality care showed the opposite: more behavioral problems and teacher conflicts, and worse academic skills.

To determine quality, researchers visit child-care facilities and evaluate what goes on between adults and children. They watch how often teachers and children interact and rate the interactions based on whether teachers are warm and positive, offer praise and encouragement, are responsive to children's actions and words, and create a positive atmosphere. Teachers who ignore kids, criticize or scold them often or create a negative, stressful atmosphere would be regarded as providing poor-quality care.

Children's temperaments were determined at 6 months of age, based on whether they were often fussy or weepy when waking or falling asleep, repeatedly resisted changes in feeding schedules, cried when left to play alone, rejected new baby sitters, objected to new procedures or fretted in new places or situations, among other traits.

Surprisingly, laid-back kids didn't show any lasting impact of high- versus low-quality care. That doesn't mean they can just be shuffled off into lousy child care, however. "All kids deserve quality of care for humanitarian reasons," Dr. Belsky says. But the developmental rewards of shelling out for a great nanny or a superb child-care center are likely to be greater with more susceptible kids.

The findings are "potentially extremely important," says Ken Dodge, a psychology professor at Duke University. "We know some people are more susceptible" genetically to adverse effects from factors such as disease or abuse, he says. But now, it seems, they also may be "the very same ones who are susceptible to becoming the creative star" in the right environment.

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