



Challenging Children

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

Eight-year-old Jessica wasn't an easy child. A bossy, fussy girl with only a few friends, she frustrated and alienated even those who loved her the most. She threw tantrums over seemingly minor issues—"These socks hurt my feet," or "This juice tastes yucky. I won't drink it." She became angry when her parents tried to leave her with a babysitter, often throwing herself down on the ground and screaming furiously. At bedtime, she demanded that her parents stay with her. Her teachers reported that she seemed overwhelmed, unable to concentrate. After school she came home saying the other girls hated her or that the teacher thought she was a dummy. At times, she could be a warm, funny girl who loved to giggle at knock-knock jokes, cuddle on the sofa with her mom or dad, and get thoroughly engrossed in her passion for horses. Most of the time she was unpredictable, and her parents were weary!

Stanley Greenspan, a leading child psychiatrist, finds the most frequent complaints from parents fall roughly into five patterns—one of which is a personality like Jessica's, often described as fussy, finicky, and oversensitive. The others are described as self-absorbed, defiant, inattentive, and aggressive.

Over the years our thinking about children who face challenges in controlling their feelings and behavior has

swung from one extreme to another. At one point, the accusing finger was directed at parents—it was *their* fault their children were impossible. Then the other extreme—children are simply born this way, and parents have no choice but to learn to live with them. We now recognize that biology and upbringing work together, that early life experiences actually determine how some cells in the nervous system will be used. Parents make a dramatic difference in how their children use their wonderfully different natural abilities.

Children are a product of the unique and continuous interplay between nature and nurture. This interplay happens in your relationship with your child. No matter what your child's natural tendencies are—whether she falls into one of the categories noted above, or how challenging a child's behavior is to you—there are approaches, styles, and attitudes that you as a parent can bring to your family life that will enable your children to overcome their challenges.

- 1 Be realistic about parenting.** Sometimes the best you can do is less than your "best." Decisions about how to use your energy and time can be complex, but the key challenge is to anticipate and plan for what your family really needs from you.
- 2 Give your child the precious gift of time.** In Greenspan's work, he found that giving special, unstructured time—30 minutes a day—to a child greatly enhances that child's ability to meet the challenges of his or her own personality. It's called *nourishing* availability!
- 3 Work towards a problem-solving orientation.** The goal is to help your child anticipate, practice, and eventually master particular challenges.
- 4 Empathize with your child.** If you don't have the same sensitivities, it can be hard to imagine what life is like for your child. Over time you can master that, just as your child can master his own challenges.
- 5 Discipline with love.** Children need both warmth and nurturing along with structure, responsibility, and discipline. The challenge is to provide discipline that is gentle and respectful, while being firm.

