

Orchids, Dandelions and Social Isolation

By Oliver Sterczyk, B.Ed., MC, RCC, CCC

Smiling helps reduce our body's response during brief periods of stress, regardless of whether we actually feel happy or not.

All of our facial expressions are contagious.

In part, how we handle feeling isolated depends on our personality. In her book *Quiet*, author Susan Cain explains “the orchid hypothesis.” Many children are like dandelions, able to thrive in just about any environment. But others are more like orchids: they wilt easily, but under the right conditions can grow strong and magnificent.

High-reactive temperaments come with risk factors. These kids are especially vulnerable to challenges like marital tension, a parent's death, or abuse. They're more likely than their peers to react to these events with depression, anxiety and shyness.

However, these risk factors have an upside. High-reactive kids who enjoy good parenting, child care and a stable home environment tend to have *fewer* emotional difficulties and more social skills than their lower-reactive peers. Often they're exceedingly empathic, caring and cooperative. They work well with others. They are kind, conscientious, and easily disturbed by cruelty, injustice and irresponsibility.

As Jay Belsky, a psychology professor and child care expert at the University of London, points out, “The parents of high-reactive children are exceedingly lucky. The time and effort they invest will actually make a difference. Instead of seeing these kids as vulnerable to adversity, parents should see them as malleable—for worse, but also for better.” He describes eloquently a high-reactive child's ideal parent: someone who “can read your cues and respect your individuality; is warm and firm in placing demands on you without being harsh or hostile; promotes curiosity, academic achievement, delayed gratification, and self-control; and is not harsh, neglectful, or inconsistent.” This advice, while terrific for all parents, is crucial for raising a high-reactive child.

As adults, in addition to our inborn temperaments and beyond the luck of our childhood experiences, can we shape ourselves and make what we will of our lives?

Many situations are ambiguous. Our interpretations and beliefs about the facts of a situation make a huge difference in how we react. We may not be fully conscious of our beliefs. We may take our interpretations to be facts. We may believe that a *situation* caused an emotional and physical reaction, when in fact it was an *interpretation* or *belief* regarding the situation.

We are hard wired for connection. Disconnection always creates pain. Wanting things to be different from how they are right now propels our thoughts into the past or into an imagined future. We may get lost in a spiral of more and more thinking. As an alternative, developing *awareness* of our experience, no matter how uncomfortable, offers potential to start living right here, in each present moment.

In this moment, right here, how are *you* feeling?

Oliver is a Registered Clinical Counsellor (RCC) and Canadian Certified Counsellor (CCC) in private practice in Gibsons. He publishes an informative blog on oliversterczyk.com and can be reached at (604) 993-0080 or oliver@oliversterczyk.com