

The spirited child

Ruth Morgan-Jones

Some children are better behaved and others are less so. What makes for this difference and why?

Having migrated to the UK from the USA in my mid-20s, where I also trained as a social worker, I have often wondered why raising well-behaved children is so central to the traditionally-minded English person's view of parenting. I was once taken on a tour of Winchester College. Above the entrance of one of its stately buildings was the phrase, "*Manners maketh man*" (Bullen *et al.*, 2010). Here seemed to be a clue. Was the good behaviour of English children simply part of the culture and one of the things that made English people distinct and admired by other cultures? In other words, the English are known to be a courteous and polite people in comparison to the rougher, slightly more extroverted cultures found in the USA and Europe (McGill & Pearce, 1982). Further investigation suggested that "*manners maketh man*" was first adopted as a motto by the Bishop of Winchester, William Wykeham, in 1367. It was then adopted by different persons throughout the 16th and 17th century (*Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 2009).

But not all English children are well behaved. Along with the majority that are, I observed that some children simply don't fit in. For whatever reason, they do not automatically obey their parents and/or teachers. These so-called misfit children have been further described as being unruly with their energy, as not listening, as not conforming to expectations and to being easily angered and upset. Rather than admiring and channelling their spirit and ability to think for themselves, parents and teachers may label these children as difficult and as having mental health issues.

Later when I founded a charity, The HearSay Charitable Trust, that worked systematically with children with special needs and their families (Holliday & Morgan-Jones, 2016), I became aware that some of these same children were labelled with other conditions. Some were on the autistic spectrum (ASD) (Woliver, 2009) some had ADHD (Nylund, 2000) and some simply were labelled as having behaviour difficulties by teachers and/or parents. Once diagnosed

by paediatricians, some were further medicalised with prescription drugs such as Ritalin. Other children escaped diagnosis altogether, but their behaviour was still seen to be problematic. Lastly, some of the parents of these different children were very happy with their children's behaviour. They simply needed reassurance from a professional that their children's behaviour was within the normal range.

In pursuing the literature on labelling and ADHD, I discovered that there is, indeed, a cultural factor present. According to the research, a child in the UK from a lower social-economic background is much more likely to receive the ADHD label than a child from the middle classes. In the USA, it is the opposite with the label more likely to be bestowed on a middle-class child. This is believed to be a reflection of cultural values. In the UK, the mental health condition known as ADHD is perceived as a behaviour problem while in the USA, it is seen as an educational one (Timimi, 2020).

My interest was further stimulated by the discovery of a book, *Raising Your Spirited Child* by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka (2015).

This book brought so many questions to mind. What exactly was a spirited child? Was my intuitive definition the same as Kurcinka's or was it something different? For example, there are many names for different children recounted in the child development literature as well as in the arts. They are sometimes called 'wild children' and 'indigo children' (Evans, 2018) and there is 'Joanna' in the film, 'News of the World' and JuJu in 'The Chair.' And of course, the most famous spirited child in American literature is Twain's Huckleberry Finn (2018).

Another question – was 'spirited' the best adjective to use to describe such a child? Some experts in the field preferred 'determined' (Mason, 2020) 'strong willed' or 'persistent'? A further concern was whether it was generally fair to call one group of children 'spirited' when in fact all children have spirit, whether it is developed or not (Hills, 2021)? Lastly, there is the question of what creates a spirited child? Here we bump in to the nature/nurture argument. Is the spirited quality something the child is born with such as their innate personality or some

other given feature that triggers the spirited quality? Or is it the result of something in their environment which has meant that the best way to cope has been to become 'spirited'? As is often the case, what is likely is, in fact, a combination of these factors.

While the above are valid questions, I do not have the answers. What I do have is my experience and understanding in working with some very specific children who I would describe as 'spirited' because I haven't discovered a term that 'fits' better than that for me. I also have my personal experience as having been a 'spirited' child myself. This gives me a passion and a determination to see that these children receive fair treatment and get the justice they deserve.

Kurcinka's view:

What about Kurcinka's view? Before sharing some specific examples of my work with spirited children, I would like to explore further how Kurcinka views the spirited child and how they are different from other children. She describes them above all as being 'more than' other children with very specific temperament traits. Six of those traits have been apparent in my work. They are intensity, persistence, sensitivity, perceptiveness, adaptability, and energy. While she puts 'energy' towards the end of her list, I would put it at the beginning as the quality that most distinguishes the spirited child from others. I would like to clarify that Kurcinka does not see the spirited child as a traumatised, neglected or abused child. However, there is the suggestion that if they are not guided and loved for whom they really are, they could easily become so. As would be expected, parenting a spirited child does require more patience and wisdom than raising more naturally well behaved, measured, less demanding children. This is what Kurcinka means when she describes them as being 'more than.' Their emotions, in particular, can be very powerful resulting in some wonderful days and some terrible ones. Kurcinka has set up a Facebook page entitled, 'Raising Your Spirited Child'. She wanted to give parents a place to meet where they could share their frustrations and their wisdom with one another.

When the spirited child client is a girl, there may also be an originality factor involved too. This is certainly how it was in the case of Maria described below.

Maria:

Maria is a tall, blonde, white British girl. She began working with me when she was nine and about to take her 11-plus. Her parents felt that she was suffering from stress and anxiety experienced as the result of bullying from a group of three girls in her primary school. They had complained to the school and the authorities claimed the bullying would be stopped. Unfortunately, it wasn't. There was undoubtedly a malicious element in Maria's classroom which the teachers were unable to control. For example, when the class broke up in to sub-groups, Maria was rarely ever chosen and she had to beg each group in turn for membership.

The bullying continued along with negative reports from the teachers. Maria, who is very articulate with an extroverted 'spirited' personality, was seen as an attention getter, immature and possibly autistic. Maria's parents did not believe she was autistic, but were nevertheless confused.

Eventually, Maria's parents and I developed a healing strategy. This consisted of Maria having a series of seven one-to-one sessions with me where we focused on doing creative crafts together. Maria also enjoyed sand play where she was able to act out some of her school frustrations. Lastly, she kept a journal where she recorded specific interactions that she had with particular girls. These experiences allowed Maria to regain her trust in adults and to become less anxious. Meanwhile, Maria's parents also participated in three parenting sessions and four family ones. I encouraged Maria's parents to be more flexible in their parenting so that Maria could have special times with her father as well as her mother. Maria's father was particularly understanding of her as he believed she resembled his own mother to whom he was very close. This suggests that in this case 'spiritedness' may have been a female family personality trait. Maria's parents were also able to encourage out of school friendships and activities which were free from the compulsive defensive behaviour which had developed in the classroom.

Initially, it appeared unlikely that Maria would get to grammar school because of her primary school's negative assessment of her. Because of the appeal system, I

was allowed to advocate for her. Rather than being difficult and possibly autistic, I described Maria as charming, vivacious and highly articulate, whose original personality had not been understood in the classroom either by the teachers or her peers. She was also exceptionally talented in art and music. I further explained that Maria was an emotionally 'open' child and she longed for recognition and appreciation. When this was not forthcoming, she blamed herself. I confirmed that I saw no signs of autism. What I had observed was a certain social awkwardness in Maria which she was likely to outgrow in time. She needed a fresh start and I believed a grammar school could offer that to her. The paediatrician who had recommended the family to me in the first place, was very supportive of my assessment and the primary school had, therefore, to change theirs.

Thankfully, Maria was accepted by her chosen grammar school. At the age of 12 in year 8 when Maria was about to select her GCSE's, her mother reported that Maria was much changed. As predicted, she matured in grammar school which she loves. She is doing well academically and has grown in confidence. She has found new friends and has extremely supportive teachers who have encouraged her both academically and personally. Maria has received prizes for both her singing and her art work. Perhaps most importantly, Maria has learned to like herself again.

This case beautifully illustrates how intervention at a crucial moment can transform the prospects of a spirited child. Once they are in the right environment where they are understood and appreciated, they are often able to blossom. There was a good result here largely because Maria's parents had the patience to see the situation through to some kind of resolution. This has not always been the case which means there have been very different outcomes with different children.

Stephan:

Another spirited child was Stephan, aged eight. His mother, Carina, had managed to migrate from Hungary to the UK and then to a town in Kent. Carina reported that he was having difficulties in school where he was found to be disruptive in the classroom and a bully of younger children in the playground. The teacher found that his behaviour would improve if she put him right in front of her where she could keep an eye on him.

However, Stephan's current behaviour problems could not be understood properly without knowing the deeper issues. In 2009, Carina had fled to a women's refuge with Stephan, 19 months old at that time. This was because of the controlling and abusive behaviour of Rupert, her husband and Stephan's father. Unfortunately, Rupert soon started court proceedings in an effort to get full custody of Stephan. He portrayed himself as the victim and accused his wife of the things he had been doing to her and Stephan. This included brainwashing, poisoning against the other parent (Gower & Chimera, 2021), child neglect, intimidation, and manipulation. Unfortunately, the professionals assessing failed to distinguish a perpetrator and a victim and more and more contact was granted to the abusive, narcissistic father. Very sadly, Carina found herself traumatised not only by her ex-husband's behaviour, but also by judges, GPs social workers, CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) officers who unwittingly aided the charming, manipulative abuser. Instead of getting help for herself and her son, she was forced to co-parent with him. Fortunately, by this time, Carina had acquired a part-time job as a receptionist and was living with her sister and parents who had also arrived from Hungary. This meant that she was ready to tell her story to me when her paediatrician referred her.

Not surprisingly, because of my own clinical training in 'neutrality' (Boscolo *et al.*, 1987), I was initially just another professional who found it difficult to believe Carina's story. However, in time, I began to fully believe in Carina's narrative as I could see certain consistent destructive patterns in the way Rupert treated his son and his malevolent determination to break Stephan's spirit. More specifically, Rupert first seduced Stephan with his charming ways. Then when Stephan made the slightest academic mistake, Rupert would chastise his son, giving him so called devotional punishment. For example, Stephan would be isolated in his room for long periods and called disparaging names like "moron". Although extremely painful, Stephan would accept this treatment, but at a great emotional cost. He tried to cope by lying, denying that he knew his own mind when this was out of character, stating his dislike of his father, and being uncooperative with mother after being with his father etc. (Vetere & Dowling, 2005).



The author, aged six, as a spirited child

In an effort to rebuild the broken trust, I initially saw Stephan and Carina together for six play therapy sessions and Carina alone for nine supportive ones. Carina purchased her own copy of Kurcinka's book and we discussed how Stephan fitted her description of a 'spirited child'. I gradually began to see a change in Stephan's behaviour. As a spirited boy, he often appeared to pull against his mother's wishes for good behaviour. When we played games together, he would need to win. Over time, Carina and Stephan relaxed and became closer. Carina was able to support and channel his spirited qualities. At the same time, Carina found ways of talking with Stephan about his feelings when interacting with his father. As Stephan was now reassured that he had the full support of his mother, he was better able to tolerate the horribly stressful moments with his father.

Rupert eventually remarried and produced two more children. Stephan became very fond of his infant half-brothers. Sadly, they became yet an additional way used by Rupert to manipulate Stephan. For example, he would tell Stephan that if he did not do his bidding, he could not see his brothers again. At one point, I discussed the possibility of referring the whole abusive situation

back to social services. Carina was adamant that this was not to happen. She felt that Rupert had been too careful and clever and that his coercive control and mental cruelty could not be seen. This meant that there simply was not enough physical 'proof' of his abusive behaviour, the kind of proof that would stand up in the court of law. While I was unhappy with her view, I respected it, and agreed to leave things as they were. Carina and Stephan have moved on from seeing me and they now have other helping supportive people in their lives. While the initial circumstances have not changed, I believe their destructive nature has. Stephan, with the help of his mother and other supportive persons, has been able to maintain contact with his father, but also continue to be his true 'spirited' self.

Georgia:

I have recently been working with a third spirited young girl, Georgia. She is 13, white, English and attends a co-ed grammar school in a seaside town. All sessions so far have been attended with her single mother, Cheryl, a school teacher. Initially, it was difficult to believe that Georgia and Cheryl were related as they do not look at

all alike. Georgia has dark straight hair with a prominent fringe and pale alabaster skin. Cheryl, on the other hand, appears full of colour with her ginger hair pulled back neatly with accompanying fresh complexion. Not only did they look different, Cheryl and Georgia appeared emotionally detached and separate from each other. Initially, I thought that I would be seeing Georgia on her own, but this has not happened. What has emerged is that mother and daughter have bonded despite/because of the long drive and very bad weather that accompanied their journey. Although normally not my practice, I always gave them a much appreciated cup of tea on arrival.

Cheryl related that she had sought counselling because of her concern over Georgia's low mood, uncooperativeness and self-harming. Georgia talks extremely quickly, almost incessantly and I found her difficult to understand. She metaphorically painted a picture of herself as a clever girl with a love of liberal politics. She found it frustrating that she could talk with her friends about politics, but not with her family as they were "too Tory." Occasionally, it would slip out that she wished she was dead and she acknowledged that she had

cut herself. Gradually further background facts emerged. I was told that Georgia's parents had separated eight years earlier and that Georgia spent time with both her parents every week. Georgia also had a younger sister, Carol, who Georgia liked, but also resented. In particular, she felt that her mother spent more time with her sister than with herself. Cheryl objected to Georgia's view explaining the circumstances that meant that she and Georgia spent little time together. They were both open to changing this pattern. Georgia also had mixed feelings about her father who she felt closer to and resembled, but complained that he didn't understand her either. At this point, Georgia's mother, Cheryl, asked if she could see me on her own.

Cheryl, with her daughter absent, was able to describe the terribly traumatic birth she had experienced with Georgia. Despite the fact that Cheryl had very high blood pressure, the midwife had told her that the birth would proceed normally. However, the consultant arriving a short time later, was convinced that the baby would be born dead unless she had a caesarean section immediately. This was performed and the baby was in good health. While everything turned out physically fine, Cheryl had felt traumatised. This feeling never really went away and it was very difficult for her to really enjoy her baby. Not only had she had a traumatic birth experience, she had little confidence as a new mother. She was in constant fear that something awful would happen to her new baby and it would be her fault. While Cheryl had protected Georgia from her traumatic birth story, she felt that it still impacted their relationship.

Cheryl also wanted to tell me how her marriage had fallen apart. As she had not been happy in her marriage for some time due to her husband's controlling ways, she found herself falling in love with another man at work. They began an affair and it was thought that they would go away together. She left her marital home and returned to her parents' home. Then she discovered that her lover was unable/unwilling to leave his wife, on top of the fact that her marriage was also over. Fortunately, her job had not been impacted by her tumultuous personal life, but, in hindsight, she did feel that it had affected Georgia. They had never discussed it, but she knew that at the age of eight, Georgia had found her phone and seen the messages between herself and her lover.

The sessions with the three of us continued. Cheryl and Georgia shared that they actually began the session in the car on the way from their home to my office. For the first time, Georgia was able to ask her mother about what had happened exactly between her and her lover and how it had been for her? They also shared that they were doing more things together like shopping and how Georgia would now come in to her bedroom to speak to her. All these little things seemed to be lightening the atmosphere between them and Cheryl was noticeably growing in confidence that she would be able to manage her daughter in this new quirky stage of being a teenager. Meanwhile, as Georgia had been getting more attention and nurturing from her mother, she appeared to be gradually relaxing her expectations of her peers. She shared how disappointed she had been when one peer broke a promise. The promise was that he wouldn't take drugs if she didn't cut herself. She recently heard that he had taken drugs which disappointed her terribly. But by this time, she was strong enough not to break her side of the promise just because he had done so.

I found this such an interesting case since, in my view, both mother and daughter were/are spirited. In order for Cheryl to relax and to become more open and accepting of all that had happened, her story needed to be heard first. This then meant that Cheryl could resolve some of her guilt, making more space for her to hear her daughter's needs.

In summary, I believe some research is needed to help shine a stronger light on children who I have called 'spirited.' It is a great shame when their 'more than' special qualities are not appreciated and channelled. In each example that I have shared, Maria, Stephan and Georgia, the individual children found a way to be themselves within the constraints they experienced. And because this was possible, there is a chance that they may find fulfilment and we will be the richer for it.

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American born, Ruth 'Kitty' Morgan-Jones is a trained social group worker and experienced counsellor. She initially trained with Relate and then founded and was the first clinical lead of the HearSay Charitable Trust. This charity, based in Maidstone, supports families that have a child with special needs. She is currently in private practice in Whitstable and Maidstone with a special research interest in 'spirited children'. Email: ruthmorganjones@gmail.com.