Towards a theory of temperament in systemic therapy: *Building a bridge between temperament and attachment in the systemic domain*

Pete Brown

This article considers the importance of temperament. Attachment theory, quite rightly in my view, has become increasingly popular in the mental health and systemic fields. Here, I want to consider why temperament, popular in the parenting field, has remained what I consider to be a *subjugated narrative* elsewhere. To put it another way, why does temperament, which I consider a close cousin of attachment, rarely see the light of day in systemic therapy, CAMHS and social care settings, and, just as importantly, what do clinicians and clients potentially miss out on by its exclusion?

Defining temperament

Temperament can be defined as *'the innate usual attitude, mood, or behaviour of a person'* (adapted from the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, 2024). I see it as a quality or characteristic that one is born with and that remains relatively stable over time. It is similar to other words that describe the more intrinsic nature of a person, such as personality and character.

Nature or nurture

Nurture (attachment) compared to *nature* (temperament) fits well with systemic ideas. We support families to change the way they relate to one another and look at patterns of communication and other 'moveable feasts'. Temperament, on the other hand, feels trickier to consider as it implies more innate and perhaps less movable ideas. I think the idea of a 'fixed personality' feels uncomfortable when it comes to systemic notions of change.

Here I hope to take the reader on a journey about why I include the notion of temperament in all my consultations with parents and carers, and I will consider how this seemingly *fixed* idea allows more *flexibility* in parenting responses to children. In my view, it is this apparent paradox that makes the notion of temperament fit well with systemic ideas of change.

The criticism cage

I have noticed over many years as a clinician, that some parents and children can become trapped in negative interactional patterns that severely affect the parent-child relationship. This can happen just as easily in a teacher-child relationship. I have called this the criticism cage, or punishment prison. It is a prison, as one cannot see any positive strategies to escape the prison while in the prison. (This idea comes from a similar process described by Hare-Mustin, 1994 and called 'the mirrored room' but in relation to gender.) In the systemic and parenting fields, one of the common things we see in family life is a child in the family 'singled out' for negative attention which we sometimes call a 'scapegoat'. Diagram 1 is intended to illustrate

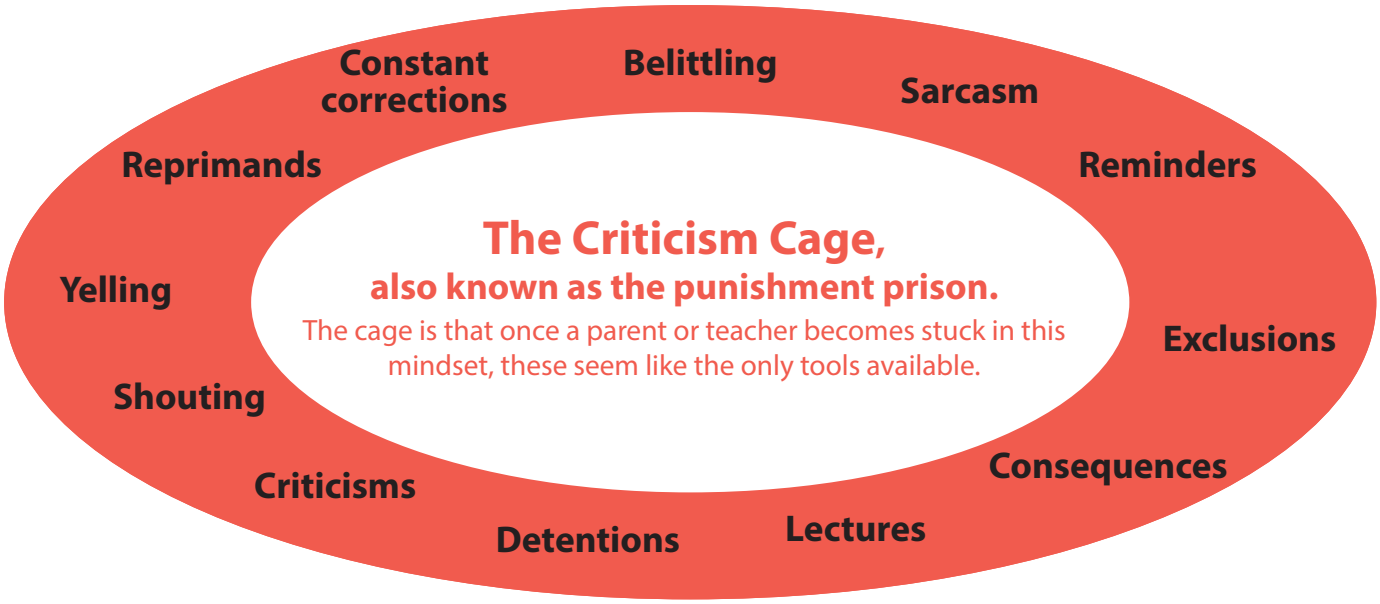

Diagram 1: The Criticism Cage

this stuck pattern looking at words and actions that show negative parent, or teacher, responses.

When there is a sibling (or siblings) I often see more positive interactions with the other child. This usually increases parental frustration, as well as contributing to fraught sibling relationships. How does attachment theory explain good enough attachments with some children and not others? Enter the concept of temperament which I think can help, in many circumstances, to explain this phenomenon!

A bold position statement

I have never yet met a family, in over 20 years of practice as a systemic family therapist, who has not found the idea of temperament helpful. In my experience it can be extremely important in supporting the parent to alter their view of the 'problem child' into a warmer relationship, which, of course, improves the attachment relationship. From a both/and position, this is why I am so interested in the intersection of attachment and temperament.

A brief tour of my journey in this area

I have been exposed to the world of temperament through parenting literature. First, via the popular American parenting programme *The Incredible Years* (Webster-Stratton, 1992) which refers to 'children's unique temperaments' but then more fully via the classic parenting book *How to Behave so your Children will too* (Severe, 2000). Many other parenting books also make references to children's different temperaments, and how we may navigate our communication towards children 'with trickier temperaments' (e.g. Janis-Norton, 2012). It is ideas from these books and others that first helped me to introduce a model of children's differing temperaments to parenting courses in Sure Start Children's centres from around 2002 (over 20 years ago now!)

Diagram 2: Four overlapping temperament styles (Model 1)

Model 1: Four overlapping temperament styles

The first model I will present is dividing temperaments in four overlapping types, adapted from the work of Severe (ibid) which I think fits well for children in early childhood (under-5s) and middle childhood (6-10). In Children's centres, as a CAMHS outreach worker, I met many parents and carers of children under five, struggling with their toddlers and pre-school children. When I introduced 'temperament types' into parent classes, I was amazed at how parents moved from often *blaming* children to more of an *understanding* stance. This model of four temperament types and their intersections with each other offers lenses of seeing children in ways that reduce blame and parental 'nagging'. I introduced these via the Venn diagram (diagram 2) and have shown typical parent comments to illustrate these ideas in practice.

Active/easy-going: with this mix a parent said to me, *"I now realise my son is just constantly on the go. This has helped me to see that active does not mean naughty. This helps me to take more care with not getting so negative towards him".*

Strong-willed/shy: *"I can now understand a little more why she is better behaved at nursery but 'rules the roost' at home. Although I find her constant questioning irritating, you have helped me to see that her cooperation at nursery is a postive aspect to be cherished. I realise that I need to manage my irritation and increase praise towards her."*

Shy/easy-going: *"I see that I should not take his easier temperament for granted. I think I need to make time to give positive attention to his helpful personality (and not get so caught up with negative reprimands to my more stubborn child)."*

Strong-willed/active: *"before this class I could only say 'why can't you be more like your sister'. Your temperament ideas have helped me see that the more I get irritated with my son, the more he does the opposite of what I want him to do! I know I need to search harder to find positives, as the negative spirals are so unpleasant as well as tiring."*

Easy-going/strong willed: this fourth type, in my experience, is rare, but sometimes parents have said, *"My child is mostly quite relaxed but when she does get a 'bee in her bonnet' there is no letting go of this!"*

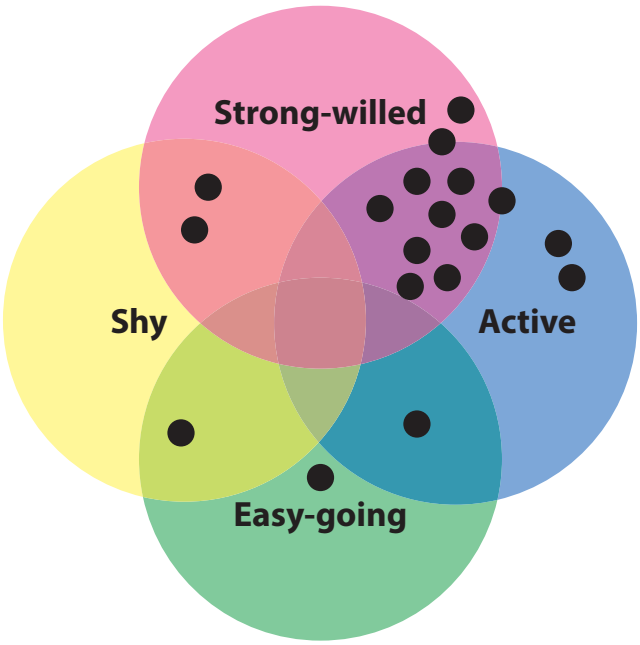

Diagram 3: Temperament categories (as shown by parents on flipchart)

Diagram 3 is a reproduction of one drawn on a flipchart in a parenting group where I ask parents to place their children in these categories. Time and time again, parents came to the group to help support how they managed children in the strong-willed / active

domains, while siblings were often placed in the more easy-going bubbles. In the actual parent group, parents usually described their child as *"a pain in the ****"* or *"bloody minded"* or *"stubborn"*. I would gently reframe this, with a twinkle in my eye, to 'strong-willed' or 'persistent' so as to introduce a more positive stance.

Often it is helpful, as shown in diagram 4 below, to spell out some of the different characteristics that go with different temperaments – this can really help parents to 'see' their child in these descriptions or mixes of descriptions. The important thing, then, is to consider what parenting tools work better for trickier temperaments which I will come to later in the article. Parents, without fail, always stated the trickier temperaments to be strong-willed or headstrong, either alone, or in combination with shy or active.

Easy-going	• Usually listens the first or second time • Generally cooperative • Often supportive to siblings • Not excessively ambitious or competitive • Popular with most adults • Responds to standard parenting • Needs can be overlooked
Shy	• Can be clingy • Often quiet and happy to play alone • Great observers of the environment and other children • Needs reassurance, time and *gentle* encouragement • As parents often worry too much about shy children, they can unwittingly force more outgoing behaviour
Active	• Filled with energy • Easily frustrated • Won't sit still for longer than a few seconds • Runs around the house – constantly on the go • 'like a bull in a China shop' • Parent often feels exhausted (understatement!) • Being very active is *not* misbehaviour.
Strong-willed	• Bright, verbal and stubborn • Likes to argue their point and have the last word • Persistent – won't take no for an answer • Does not usually like surprises or changes • Needs time warnings to help manage behaviour • Demands attention positively or negatively • Can be irritating to adults (understatement)

Diagram 4: Some temperament characteristics from model 1 (adapted from Severe, 2000)

Temperament and parenting styles

These temperament types fit well with parenting styles as shown on the parent line, which I discussed in a recent article in *Context* magazine (Brown, 2023). Why is it, for example, easier for a parent to stay in the more balanced middle-ground with a child in the more easy-going domain, yet get pulled into parenting extremes when dealing with a headstrong child? Once we look at temperament types, and consider the associated parenting styles, the door can open to a variety of parenting tools from within the middle ground of the parent line. The aim is to help manage problematic behaviours as well as noticing times of more cooperative behaviour.

Model 2: Two temperament styles

In recent years, I have been working with many parents, offering mainly NVR interventions, who often rate themselves as *"super-stressed"* about their children's attitudes and behaviour. Usually, children have entered the often-tumultuous adolescence phase of childhood. In highly charged situations, where thinking capacity is often limited, I have reduced the temperament schema from four to two main types. I call these type 1 and type 2 temperament dispositions as shown in diagram 5. The aim is to simplify the categories, without watering down the importance of understanding differing temperaments. I also add in the idea of frustration tolerance which usually correlates with the temperament styles.

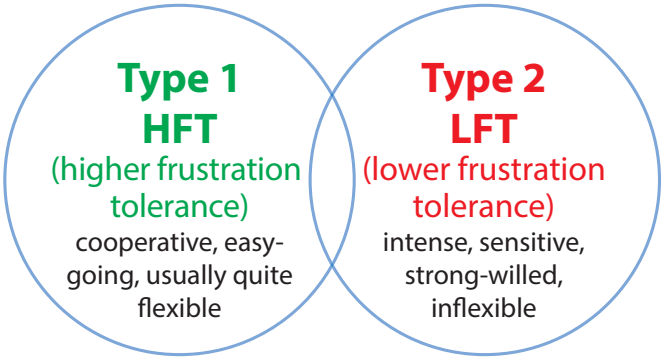

Diagram 5: Two temperament styles (Model 2)

I regularly put this statement to parents and caregivers. This is taken from my website where I explain my approach to working with parenting advice.

I often think of children as having two main types of temperament. Children with a mainly 'type 1' disposition, can be described as mainly easy-going and generally cooperative. Children with a mainly 'type 2' disposition, are usually stronger-willed and more easily irritated. The second type also often reject or constantly question family rules and values. Moreover, the more we correct them, the more they revolt against the rules!

Introducing more complexity

Once connections start to take place, and parents gain more thinking space, the binary categories can become more flexible in themselves. I also often introduce an 'in-between' type 3 category (diagram 6). This can help add more complexity, such as a child who may present as say 75% type 1, 25% type 2, and any other combinations.

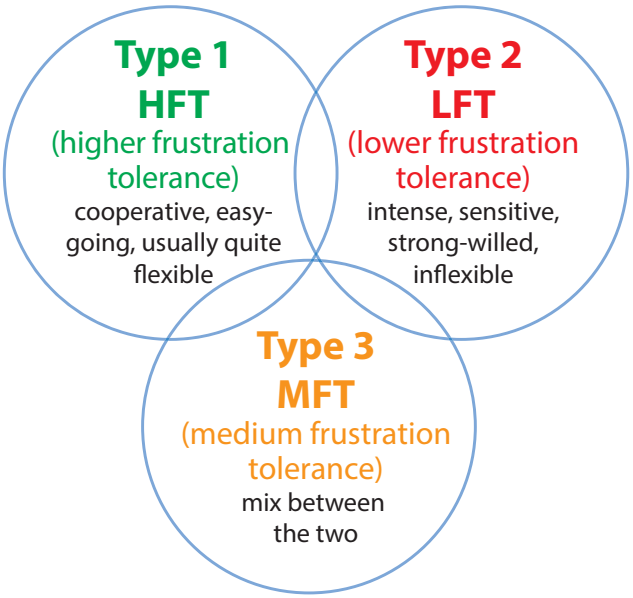

Diagram 6: Three temperament styles (Model 2)

A note about the effects of past trauma

In my experience as a trained trauma therapist, type 1 can present as type 2 in the presence of past serious trauma. What we know generally about temperaments is that they are consistent over time. However, when taking a history, I sometimes come across a description of a previously more easy-going child, in the face of trauma, presenting as more oppositional. For parents affected by complex PTSD, I find they often need more support than a short-term NVR intervention can provide alone.

In my ventures in this area, there are sometimes other surprises. For example, I am currently seeing a family where a seemingly type 2 child was always described as type 1 before adolescence, without a stated history of trauma. Understanding this is work in progress and currently, the variations of the type 3 presentation help to create a good-enough fit. However, perhaps we can hypothesise that entering adolescence is such a big life transition that there may be sudden changes that seem like temperament fluctuations.

Escaping the criticism cage

Diagram 7 below includes a door to escape the criticism trap, based on the connection before correction principle. Again, using the parent line, the next step is to consider if parents have become pulled into authoritarian parenting with type 2 children, while they may continue with more measured, democratic parenting with type 1 children.

I find these categories really help to introduce an array of parenting tools, often via an NVR approach, that works with 'relationship repair' and the connection before correction principle. Discussions about parenting related to generation, gender and cultural beliefs and family scripts, may also enter the discussion. In my experience this often adds a rich experience when considering the intersection of parenting styles, possible changes to styles and values related to parenting tools. (The parenting tools themselves are beyond the scope of this article but can be found in the NVR toolkit and among other positive parenting programmes).

Temperament and neurodiversity

Many readers may see that notions of temperament can fit well with categories of neurodiversity. For example, from the model 1 schema, active can be renamed 'super-active' to include concerns about ADHD. From model 2, sensory overload can often be added to type 2 for concerns about Autism. In conversation with parents, we can look at the nuances and differences about their child's unique temperament – and perhaps diagnosis – and think about parenting ways that become more helpful in creating

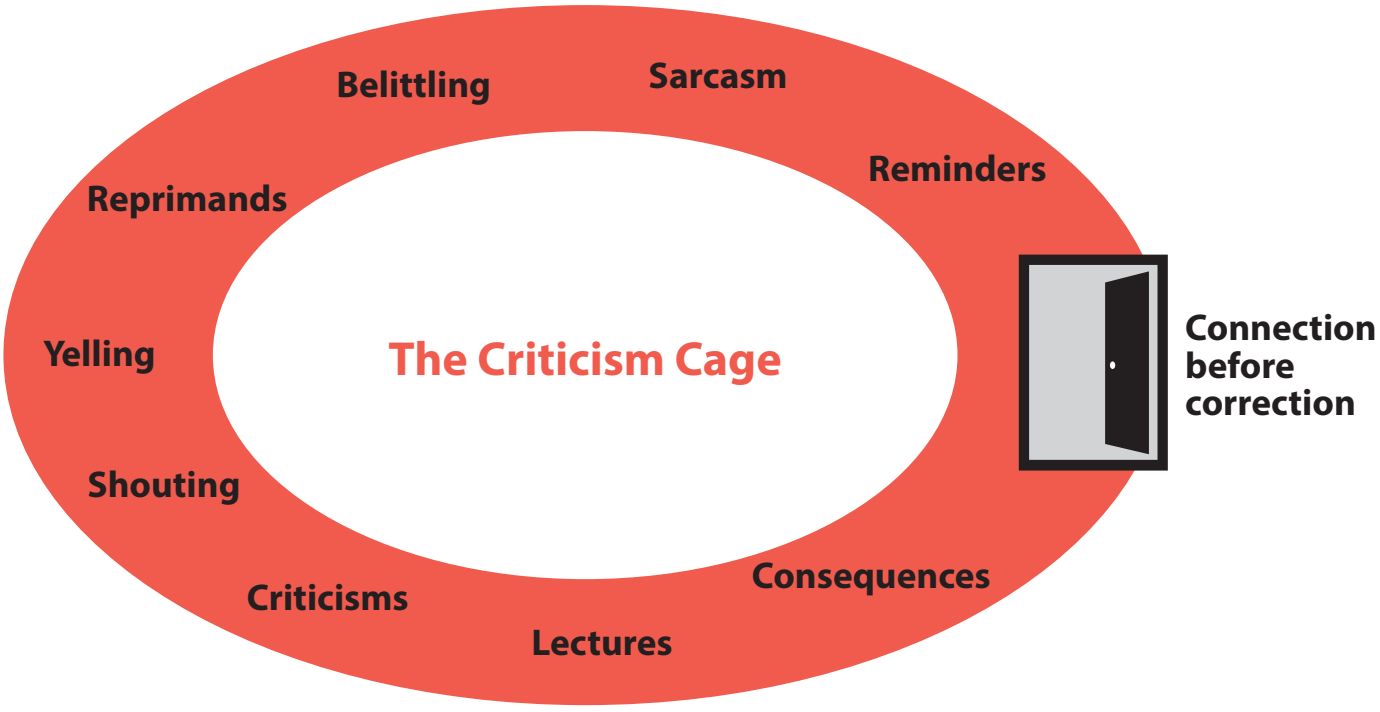

Diagram 7: The criticism cage with *connection before correction* escape route

changes. As I have suggested, there is a paradox that the fixed categories often act as a springboard into more flexible thinking. I am increasingly working with families with neurodiversity. However, more discussion about temperament and ADHD / autism intersections is beyond the scope of this introductory article.

The process of uneven change

Once parents / caregivers accept children and young people with, for example, a predominantly type 2 disposition, blame is typically reduced, and so more positive ways to connect can be introduced. This is usually in a 'two steps forward, one step back' way. At this time, I may also introduce verbal sentences that do not damage the young person's self-esteem or strong spirit, based on the three 'C's of communication – containing, connecting and correcting comments (Brown, 2024).

Treating children according to their needs

Another helpful aspect is the shift from parents treating all children the *same* to treating children *according to their needs*. Once parents grasp that authoritarian parenting never works with headstrong children, this can pave the way for parents to re-consider their parenting style, often via the parenting line model and the importance of the 'middle-ground' as already described.

The position of more easy-going siblings

As well as sharpening the focus of connection before correction principle for children with a type 2 disposition, there is also often a vitally important spin off. Where there is a sibling, a discussion usually opens about the importance of ringfencing time for children with type 1 dispositions, so that they no longer miss out on parental time. This is often a huge relief to parents to recognise and then find small, yet significant, pockets of time for the more easy-going child. This can also significantly reduce sibling hostility and rivalry as the type 1 child feels less resentment to their sibling who often takes up so much parental time and energy. (Just to add, if a parent has two or more type 2 children, this usually indicates to me *substantial* stress in the family, often needing a step up in support).

Parent temperaments

Here I will briefly describe some intersections or crossovers of children's and parents' temperaments, including what one might call various types of fit between temperament types. Sometimes parents may reach an *ah-ha* moment of considering their own temperament fit. I do not think this is absolutely necessary, but it can be very helpful. Some brief examples follow:

- **Type 1 parent, type 1 child:** there is a natural fit here in my experience which makes parenting pleasurable most of the time. However, when another family member has a more type 2 disposition, this can lead to more sparks in the family dynamics!
- **Type 1 parent, type 2 child:** parenting is usually described as very stressful as the parent finds it hard to put themselves in the child's shoes and usually doesn't like and tries to avoid conflict. As one parent said, *"I never broke any rules when I was a child, so how come I have a child who is a constant rulebreaker?"*.
- **Type 2 parent, type 2 child:** this is the battleground arena of constant arguments. However, parents can change, as they usually have the energy to make changes. Parents often say *"He is just like me – we are so alike – neither of us will give in!"* A problem occurs, however, if they cannot shift their value base from authoritarian to authoritative parenting (extreme end to the middle ground), as shown on the parent line. Please see box 1 for an idea about how I encourage parents to make the first move to initiate change.
- **Type 2 parent, type 1 child:** a typical example is where a bossy parent orders a child around, and the child has to absorb this without too many complaints. Unfortunately, it is my experience that underneath the child can suffer from very low self-esteem, often extending into adult life, as their strengths are seldom noticed or commented upon.

Let me reiterate again: these 'types' are conversation starters. Soon more options and nuances can be introduced as parents stress levels reduce and they can begin think more clearly and with more complexity and reflexivity.

Box 1: *Why should I change? – it is my child who has the problem!*

Over many years I have developed a simple recipe that helps parents to initiate change in the face of a child with a strong-willed and spirited temperament. It has just three ingredients plus an important mantra:

1. When strong-willed children face a strong-willed parent, they tend to dig themselves a deeper hole rather than swallow their pride and make steps to climb out.
2. Parents are older and wiser and therefore can choose not to get into a battle in the moment but come back to deal with the issue at a later more neutral time. (This skill is taught in NVR.)
3. Although wilful children rarely admit or even see that they could be wrong, continuous parent criticism seriously erodes their self-esteem and creativity, which they need to find their place in the world.

Above all, I suggest, often as a mantra, that if a parent can role model calmness, compromise and the regular giving of compliments, their child will learn these skills too, not usually *overnight*, but more often *over time*.

Conclusion

There may be a first time yet to come, but in my long career navigating the parenting and systemic fields, let me say again that I have never yet met a parent or carer who has not found the notion of temperament very useful. Once a parent or carer sees the child as innately strong-willed (together with the common accompanying rigidity of this temperament type) many, though sadly not all, seem to be able to manoeuvre into a warmer, more accepting position. This, in turn, more often than not, opens the door to an array of positive parenting strategies to help connect (rather than constantly correct) their child. *Correction before connection* (so common with type 2 children) is to my mind anti-attachment. On the other hand, *Connection before correction* is pro-attachment. The strategies that I promote come mainly from the NVR toolkit though sometimes I mix and match from other parenting programmes as well, especially with younger children. And once parents move to a position of flexible-meets-fixed (as opposed to fixed-meets-fixed) the art of movement becomes

easier, and the parent often sees (or re-sees) positive aspects of the child, which were previously hidden from sight.

I will end with a short case example. I am grateful to Christina Cusack, clinical psychologist in a CAMHS setting in west London, for offering this example of introducing the notion of temperament into a conversation with parents.

A young person under CAMHS struggled with mental health and had multiple overdoses whilst under the influence of alcohol. Due in part to cultural beliefs around alcohol use, parents struggled to accept such behaviours, which resulted in them trying to intervene by offering lectures about the use of alcohol and questioning her when coming home after being out with friends. She was the youngest child and her siblings were all agreeable and keen to please parents. Through family sessions, we began using NVR strategies to help them think about the young person's temperament and how this impacts her perception of parental criticism. We thought about increasing more positive interactions at home and when to address things, not in the heat of the moment (striking when the iron is cold). I could see the child's perception of the relationship improve, which had an impact on her wanting to spend more time with them. Alcohol consumption seemed to reduce when things were going better at home, and this had a positive impact on her suicidality.

Glossary

ADHD: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
CAMHS: Child & adolescent mental health service
NVR: Non-violent resistance – a psychological therapy / parenting approach originally based on the socio-political NVR movement. For more information see https://nonviolentresistance.org.uk/
PTSD: Post traumatic stress disorder
(This glossary states what acronyms stand for, for the benefit of readers, such as parents, outside the therapy field.)

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Pete with Misty who is both easy-going and strong-willed. She thrives on 'connection before correction'.

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