



Welcome to this free sample from my course Raising Orchids: A Course on Raising the High-Needs or Orchid Child. This course is designed for families of higher-needs or sensitive or orchid children. Too often families of these kids find that modern parenting methods just don't work for their kid and they feel left behind by all the advice given today. By understanding more about these children and their needs, this course provides parents with a pathway to better parent these unique children. I hope you enjoy this free sample.

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### **Raising Orchids: Week 1** **Understanding the Orchid Child**

Welcome to Raising Orchids. If you're here, I'm going to take a leap and assume you too have one of these very unique children. You know the ones. They are not quite like any of the other kids you've seen around or perhaps even raised and sometimes you can't help but wonder what exactly you've done that can make things *so freaking hard...* but also so very rewarding. How does this child who can meltdown in a second with the best of them also be one of the happiest and attuned kids you've met?

This is just one of the complexities of the orchid child and why parenting these kids is something people really don't understand unless they've been there themselves. Why all the advice people give you not only doesn't work, but you almost know it won't work right off the bat.

*Cry-it-out? I just know in my heart that my child not only wouldn't sleep better, but probably would never stop crying either.*

*Punishment? I've tried and it just seems to devastate my child in a way that I'm not comfortable with.*

*The quick daycare drop-off? They say my child will just adjust but it's been months and we're still at the crying stage and my child clings to me like their life depends on it unless I'm there for a while before leaving.*

These are just some of the normal things that parents of orchids experience and for many, they turn to the same question: **What did I do?**

NOTHING!

Well, perhaps not truly “nothing”, but nothing *wrong* at least, and we'll get to this issue later this lesson.

This brings me to what the purpose of this first lesson is and that is: information. So many people who have an orchid child really don't quite understand what this means for the child or for them as parents. I think it's imperative that families truly understand what makes an orchid child, why they even exist in our society, what their strengths and weaknesses are, what kinds of parenting they generally need (specifics are for later lessons), and also what it means for those of us who may be adult orchids or married to one. In fact, for each lesson I will do my best to link the information provided to adults because, as we'll get to, there is a genetic component to being an orchid and so many of us find that these traits that may be baffling to us in our kids are quite similar to ones we ourselves had or that we see in our partner.

I hope you will also forgive me for the use of stories from my own experience, but I have found over the years that examples can sometimes be far more powerful than any long-winded explanation of things. Given I am raising an orchid-par-excellence, my example file is quite full and hopefully my failures can serve as a basis for your successes.

## Section 1: Defining the Orchid (And Where Did They Come From?)



As someone who has no green thumb whatsoever, I have to admit that the first time I heard this term, I was a little confused. I knew orchids were beautiful, but that was about it. As I learned through studying the research on orchid children, however, orchids themselves are incredibly difficult to grow; for most people, they are just unable to get that orchid to bloom as it was made to. The key to growing orchids is apparently in the environment; you have to have that perfect environment for an orchid seedling in order for it to become that famously beautiful flower.

See where we're going here?

Orchid children are like orchids in this way: They are highly susceptible to their environment and what kind of environment they grow in will dictate how well – or poorly – they turn out. This ability to go one of two ways depending on the environment they grow in is referred to as *differential susceptibility*. In short, it means that when orchid children have the right environment, they thrive and thrive in ways that go beyond other children and we'll talk about this, but when they are raised in the wrong environment, they are the ones most at risk for a variety of problems, including mental health problems, physical illnesses, substance abuse, and so on.

This is in contrast to the other children who are considered *dandelions* for their more robust nature. The bulk of children fall under the dandelion umbrella and are more resilient to the ups and downs of their environment. Like all humans, they can of course struggle and face risk of negative outcomes when the environment is horrific, just as you could kill dandelions if you try hard enough, but by and large these children seem unphased by things that could devastate the orchid child.

This terminology and the bulk of the research on orchid children comes from Dr. W. Thomas Boyce of UC San Francisco. He has spent decades studying these individual differences in children in order to help us come to a fuller understanding of what it means to have an orchid child. Like most of us who are interested in orchids because we're raising one or are one, his interest initially stemmed from his sister who was an orchid that did not fare so well. Although there is other relevant research that has formed the basis of the information in this course, including quite a bit of work by Dr. Jay Belsky, I felt compelled to give special mention here because we truly would be lost without the work Dr. Boyce has done.

So we have the idea that we have these kids that are susceptible to their environments – far more so than the average child – but how many of these kids are there and why on earth do they have this trait?

For starters, studies seem to find that orchids make up 15 to 20% of all children (and thus adults). This is a pretty robust finding that has been replicated numerous times. However, it's worth mentioning that although they are classified as a subgroup, in reality we're talking about a *spectrum*. Children may be more or less orchid-like depending on one crucial factor: their stress reactivity.

Many families ask me how they can know if they have an orchid child and the answer is how they respond to stress at a physiological level. Unfortunately this can actually be hard to tell in some cases (though in others parents are very certain they see this immediate and strong reaction to stress in their children starting at a young age), especially for kids who just aren't exposed to that many stressful situations which is why it's often determined in a laboratory during a study. Researchers expose children to moderate stressors and measure their physiological response. Those that fall in the top 15-20% are the orchids and it's often because that level borders more of a gap than if it were purely continuous, though some children may be closer to orchids than their other dandelion counterparts.

You may be wondering how to tell about your own child's stress response now. Many of you will have seen first-hand how your child responds to situations that are stressful and it often involves a very large amount of distress, but some won't. This is why a laboratory setting is needed because not all children respond to stress in the same outward manner; in fact, one can be an orchid who looks calm but is in fact highly stressed but internalizing all of it. These children may be the orchids who struggle the most because they are not easy to identify and may even come across as aloof or troublemakers. They get highly stressed, but instead of melting down, just hold onto it and let it out slowly and likely in ways that seem like they don't care.

This stress reactivity is so crucial because how children develop in the world is in large part dictated by how they respond to it. And how they respond to it is dictated by how they interpret it. And when we are stressed out, our interpretations can be incredibly negative.

This brings us to the question of why on earth we have these children anyway? Wouldn't it be better if we were all resilient?

As it turns out, no. The orchid children and adults in our life actually have great value to our entire community, especially historically when we lived in smaller communities and survival was of the essence. The orchids among us are the canaries in our coal mine, as Dr. Boyce so aptly says. Their heightened sensitivity to their environment makes them perfect at sensing danger and discord ahead of when it may happen. This is likely why, for a while, there was discussion in the research that orchid children had to be exposed to some environmental stressor which is what triggered the "orchidness" (this is where epigenetics come into play as it is a combination of genetics and environment). Needless to say, the parent of any orchid would be panicked over this because the idea that you may have created an environment that was traumatic in some way is horrifying to think of (trust me, I know). Now, the thing is, that environment could have been prenatally in which you faced stress during

pregnancy; it could have been prematurity and trip to the NICU; it could have been exposure to a natural disaster; so there are lots of things that are out of a parents control.

But as is typical in research, it isn't so simple.

Yes, our orchids can be "activated" by negative environments and we do see more orchids born into these situations than more benign ones, but – a big but – there are also more orchids on the other end of the environmental spectrum. That is, we also see more orchids in nurturing, loving, responsive environments where orchids thrive. There are (at least) a couple hypotheses here (that I'm aware of). One is that these individuals also have a benefit to our society in good times because their positive traits (which we'll get to) greatly assist those around them. The second is that because in hard times it may be more difficult for them to procreate due to some of the negative effects of being in such environments for them, and because they have such a value to societies in those times, they are overrepresented in the positive end of the spectrum so that we always have enough when times are tough.

So for parents who were worried about this potential exposure to trauma, you can rest easy knowing that perhaps your orchid came about *in part* because you were so nurturing and loving. This "in part" may be more or less depending on the individual genetic contribution for your child. That is, when we speak about epigenetics, we must acknowledge that for some people the genetic is the driving force and small environmental effects will trigger an expression of a particular gene. However, for others, the expression may come about in larger part due to environmental circumstances that suggest this is an ideal environment, in this case, for an orchid to grow. This fits with the observations of many in the gentle parenting field that it seems to be inundated with orchids relative to the population of families who started out and maintained more Western-culturally-specific parenting practices, though I personally haven't found research to wholly support that this is the case.

Of course this now leads to the argument that you may have inadvertently created this rod for your back, but to that I have two comments. First, if providing a wonderful, nurturing environment that suggests this child could become the type of leader and wonder that orchids can be is considered a bad thing, then please take a moment to rethink your longer-term expectations for your children. Second, although this may be harder, there is nothing you can do about it now – the orchid expression is there and will not change if you change the environment again. In fact, only bad can come from that. So I'm sorry, but you'll have to accept it and move forward.

I think it's also important to note that orchids aren't just found in humans, but have been identified in other primates as well, highlighting their importance to other social mammals as well. This social element is crucial because their ability to either serve as the canary in the coalmine in negative times or use their ingenuity to help lead our communities in good times results in greater benefits for all members.

Regardless of where or how your orchid came about, you have one and hopefully it's nice to know that there is a larger purpose to the hard times that often accompany being the parent of an orchid, but you didn't come here to learn just why your child is an orchid, but rather what to do about it.

This is the end of the free sample from Raising Orchids: A Course on Raising the High-Needs or Orchid Child. Thank you for listening/reading and if you would like more, you can register for the entire course at [EvolutionaryParenting.com](https://EvolutionaryParenting.com) under [Courses](#).