



# Know Your Parenting Personality

*How to Use the Enneagram to Become  
the Best Parent You Can Be*

JANET LEVINE



WILEY

John Wiley & Sons, Inc



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Also by Janet Levine

*The Enneagram Intelligences: Understanding Personality  
for Effective Teaching and Learning*

*Inside Apartheid: One Woman's Struggle  
in South Africa*



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To my parents,  
Solly and Eileen Berman





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# Introduction

This book, in matter-of-fact, straightforward language, describes the personalities of ordinary people and how they function as parents. While the book is based on Enneagram (E-model) theory, the material encompasses the latest ideas and trends in the field of personality studies as a whole.

The Enneagram is a model of personality that describes nine worldviews or strategies—nine intelligences. In Greek *ennea* means “nine” and *gram* means “graph” or “model.” Fully accounting for individual differences—race, sex, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, intelligence—the E-model allows for an infinite variety of individual expression within its nine strategies. The model is based on nine patterns of thoughts, feelings, motivations, and perceptions. Each encompasses a distinctive way of perceiving the world. No E-strategy is better than any other; they are all equally valid.

I believe that the E-model is an invaluable path to one’s inner growth as a parent. This dynamic system can be your best guide to becoming the parent you want to be.

The aim and purpose of this book is to help you put this groundbreaking understanding of personality to work for yourself and your family. When you first uncover the motivations underpinning your personality, some aspects may seem strange and unfamiliar. But as you become more comfortable with knowing yourself, the strangeness fades. Soon you'll wear your new knowledge like a pair of glasses that allow you to see not only your own worldview clearly but also the worldviews of the others with whom you share your life. I look forward to showing you how to use this vision to achieve your parenting goals. Let's start by looking at what some of those goals might be.

## **Establishing Strong Connections with Your Child**

Imagine parent-child interactions in which you're aware of how your personality affects the way you behave as a parent and how the personality of your child interacts with your own. In such a situation you are both winners. No one feels alienated because of personality differences. Being aware of your personality patterns provides insight to help you mobilize good parenting strategies. In this way you can reconcile the differences between yourself and your child.

It's important to recognize that all personalities are equally valid; none is better than another. Recognizing that there are alternate worldviews helps you nurture your child's self-esteem and allows you to connect in ways you never knew were possible.

## **Changing Self-Defeating Behavior Patterns**

We all know that personality differences exist in the world. How often have you caught yourself being reactive in response to

someone else and sighed, “Here I go again”? When you know your own personality strategy, you are freed from habitual patterns of behavior and a perspective with a narrow focus. This knowledge improves interactions with your child (and others). Such knowledge leads you out of the cage created by your habitual patterns of behavior and unlocks for you an accurate understanding of the attributes of personality.

When you grow to be aware of your personality strategy, you realize that it is both your greatest strength as a parent (parenting by personal example) and your greatest weakness (alienating for your child, whose motivations for his or her behavior are quite unlike your own). This knowledge can free you to become a true guide. By being less dominant as a parent and finding ways to encourage your child to be him- or herself, you cease to be at the center of your parenting stage and become a facilitator for your child’s growth and development.

At first this behavioral shift can feel counterintuitive. But allow time for the dynamic to develop, and the results can be affirming for you and your child.

## **Deepening Communication with Your Child**

Communication is your essential tool as a parent. It’s evident that our personality disposition is all too present in the way we communicate. What if, inadvertently, the way you communicate is the primary reason you do *and do not* connect with your child? For instance, let’s take a situation in which you try to explain to your child that he or she has to bear the consequences for certain actions, like carelessly throwing a softball and breaking a neighbor’s window. The child with the same personality as your own will understand what you’re saying, because your minds work the same way. But what about the child with a different personality? *The very way you communicate* can be alienating in and of itself.

Some parents, whom I name *Moralizers*, communicate through a message that focuses on details, analysis, and morals. In another parenting style, that of the *Helper*, the primary motivation is to meet the child's need and forgo the consequences of his actions. It's hard for these parents to hold a line. Parents who are *Organizers* want to work with the child and create a schedule of tasks that will help redress the situation. *Dreamers* strive to connect emotionally with the child in reference to the circumstances and find a creative solution together. Whatever else transpires, they want their child to be happy. *Observer* parents look for the big picture, sit down with the child, and try to bring objectivity and perspective to the table. Parents who are *Questioners* create a mental argument and go back and forth with questions, doubts, and worst-case-scenario imagining until they're convinced that the child has a sure, logical base for understanding the situation. *Entertainers* prefer a more laid-back style and shoot the breeze with their child. They like anecdotes and leave conclusions open-ended and multioptional: the child can make a choice as to the consequences he or she prefers. The natural bent of *Protectors* is to take charge in a protective way, to yell at the child but then to go to bat for him or her against all comers. *Peacekeepers* are driven by their personality to avoid conflict, so this situation is a catch-22. These parents tend to procrastinate in speaking about the situation, and then they broaden the parameters of the discussion as a way of deflating the intensity and potential for confrontation. They smudge the lines so as to be able to be more inclusive of all points of view.

A personal example illustrates the difficulty with communication. My mother's personality style is that of the Questioner, one who questions, doubts, and spins worst-case scenarios as a way of establishing safety and certainty. My personality, the Organizer, is to be efficient and make things work. I chart a course and forge ahead. This is foolish behavior to her. We love one another, *and* we've had many personality clashes; our worldviews are so different. When I was a child, her way of communicating with me



often simply did not make sense. I couldn't understand the basis of her questioning. We could have existed on different planets.

For instance, in South Africa, where I grew up, from an early age I was an antiapartheid activist. My mother questioned all my activism, constantly regaled me with worst-case scenarios, and voiced severe doubts about my motivations for being so involved. *Now* I realize fully that from her point of view she was being protective and (justifiably) concerned for my safety. What I heard *then* was nagging, lack of support, and no understanding of my idealism. It took me years to make time to listen to her doubts and questions. Now I know she's not targeting me personally, but simply questioning the way I'm thinking, or a belief system, or whether the world has to be the way it appears.

## **Reducing Stress**

Certain parent-child interactions are always going to push your buttons and be stressful; the interpersonal chemistry is simply "wrong" or "off." If this situation builds over the years, you can experience parental burnout. Yet other interactions with your child are always pleasurable and enjoyable and induce a natural high. How can you optimize these situations and minimize those that are stressful? In coming to know yourself as a parent, you learn to recognize the internal shift between when you're stressed and when you feel relaxed (secure). In either of these situations you can come across as almost a different parent. This is invaluable information in protecting yourself and your child from the repetitive ravages of stressful situations.

## **Gaining New Self-Awareness**

Thinking about how your personality affects the way you parent can be a whole new way for you to understand yourself. This is

true for many thousands of people who've been introduced to this material.

Since the time of ancient Greece, and probably for several thousand years before that, our parenting skills, without in-depth knowledge of our personalities, have been practiced, metaphorically speaking, in the dark. Until now we've not had the technology and the tools to be precise in understanding ourselves and those we love more dearly than life itself—our children. Once we follow the injunction handed down to us from those ancient times and come to know ourselves, we can make adjustments and shifts in our behavior as parents and bring a new passion and awareness based on the understanding of how our personalities work.

## **Identifying Your Gifts, Enhancing Your Relationships**

Our effectiveness as parents is greatly enhanced when we learn about our qualities and gifts and can apply them positively. It is a truism that people have low and high sides to their personalities; we say, "This brings out the best (or worst) in me." Your gifts come to the fore when you feel secure within yourself and manage your anxiety threshold. When you are not feeling down on yourself, you are in a sense more whole, more able to utilize the positive energy of your personality traits. You can also help develop the gifts of your children and others.

## **Becoming a Facilitator, Helping Support the Flowering of Your Child's Personality**

How to become a facilitator? When you become aware of your personality and understand what motivates you and why you behave the way you do, usually compassion for yourself arises with this new knowledge. But you also know now that there are

other personality types with whom you share the world, and they are as deeply ingrained in the cages of their habitual thinking as you are in yours. This leads you to feel compassion for them, too. From this new perspective you see your child with different eyes. “Maybe,” you think, “he always reacts in *that* way because I’m always coming at him in *this* way.” If you can learn to use the parenting strategies in this book, you can change your behavior (mainly by getting yourself out of the way and respecting the fact that your child may be of a different personality from you) and be a better facilitator of your child’s progress.

This process may take time; don’t be discouraged if at first nothing changes. Constantly think about yourself and others in a paradigm of personality. This lens allows you to see with clarity the rich and complex patterns of human behavior.

## Getting Started

In 1990 I started working intensively with the E-model. I’ve studied it, continue to use it myself, and teach it to others. I wrote a book about it for educators. I’ve written articles, taught workshops internationally, and conducted panels on it. I’ve listened to many hundreds of people on panels, most of them parents and teachers, share their understanding of how their inner motivations and behaviors work in the world.

For the illustrations and examples in this book, I draw on the comments and observations of these panelists. I’m grateful to them for their self-observation skills and their willingness to share their stories, insights, and wisdom.

Even though every family is different, you will resonate with these parents’ strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures, feats and foibles. Their stories highlight their key motivations, followed by a strategy and action program that enables other parents of that particular personality pattern to use it to their best advantage.

I strongly believe that once you determine your own personality pattern, you will become more interested in how other people—especially those you love—tend to see the world. To that end, I encourage you to read the entire book, including the epilogue and topics for discussion in the back. But, please try to resist the temptation to type other people. Let them enjoy taking the journey themselves.

Let's get started on yours.



# Discovering Your Parenting Personality

## *What's Your Type?*

### **Recognizing What Motivates You**

Let's begin with nine simple questions. There are no right or wrong responses to this well-tried methodology for identifying the foundation of your personality, your dominant motivational mode. Once you understand what motivates you, you'll be prepared to discover whether you tend to be a Helper, Organizer, Dreamer, Observer, Questioner, Entertainer, Protector, Peacekeeper, or Moralizer. Following each question are three statements. Choose the one that fits you most closely.

- 1. When you reflect on your own approach to parenting, which of the following statements best describes your style?**
  - a. My parenting style has to do with interaction and energy, with connecting to my children. I ask myself, "Am I getting through on an emotional level?" I try to feel where they are coming from. Do they understand where *I'm* coming from?

How am I coming across to them? How do they see me? It's important that we connect in a meaningful way.

- b. My parenting style is intuitive; I have a gut sense about what's right and wrong, fair and unfair. I'm ambivalent about conflict, but when I have something to say, I have a great need to say it and to be heeded. I don't like being encumbered by extraneous demands or the social expectations of others.
- c. My parental style is intellectual, no question. I'm interested in how children think, process information, work with ideas. I live in my head—conceptualizing, fantasizing, thinking things through, researching, and proving—that's what's important to me. "Rationality" is a big word with me.

**2. How do you assess the way you communicate with your family?**

- a. What you see is what you get. I don't use guile or fancy gimmicks. I talk about things the way I understand them; I give it my best shot. My family gets my honest sense of how it is.
- b. I like to present things in the best light possible, not being dishonest but finding ways to connect, to make sure I get a response—the medium is the message, that kind of thing. So I try to put on a show in a way, highlight my ideas, find the nuances of expression that will help me get through to them. I use emotion and some dramatics, anything that will help them better understand what I'm saying.
- c. I try to keep things as conceptual, uncluttered, and intellectually pure as I can. I love to ask questions, to practice skepticism, to be a discerning thinker. I try to probe below the surface. I want my children to learn to think this way, too. If we can stick with what's rational and logical, we're on solid ground.

**3. You try to teach your children how to solve problems and make decisions, to encourage their positive personal growth.**

**What is most important to you about facilitating your children's growth? Choose one:**

- a. I facilitate their growth through mental activity, finding answers, the excitement that comes from seeing their minds open to new possibilities, to big-picture connections, to new conclusions. Their mental energy stimulates my own thinking. I like that.
- b. I facilitate their growth through valuing them as people. I teach them the possibilities of all sorts of human contact and connection: the emotional highs and lows, the feeling of togetherness when we all click and experience some profound interconnection in the moment. My family is a small world complete unto itself; we play out our lives together—unity built on empathy and human understanding, little else.
- c. I facilitate their growth by trying to steer them in a direction where they can make a difference and lead fulfilled lives. People need a sense of themselves, of where they stand. The world is difficult to understand—you can lose your way all too easily. Teaching them, for me, is giving them some skills, some tools, some road maps to take on their journey.

**4. Although you get along with your children most of the time, every so often you clash. What would *they* say about *you* in those moments?**

- a. I come on too emotionally when I'm talking to them; they often feel as if I'm trying to manipulate them into interacting with me. Why can't I just say things out straight? I try to shine it on; it's almost as though I need their approval.
- b. I'm too abstract, too theoretical, too detached. They need more emotional, personal interaction from me. We're talking, I'm listening, but they have this sense that I'm not

really there, that I've moved to somewhere in my head. The harder they try to know where they are with me, the more I distance myself. They question whether anything gets through to me emotionally.

- c. I can come across as an immovable force, solid, implacable, although I'm not usually aware of this. I know that I can dig in, and nothing people say or do will shift me. I've been accused of being overly defensive, stubborn, critical. I'm not usually aware of my impact on people.

**5. Your child is in serious trouble in school because of a grave offense. How do you try to help in this difficult moment?**

- a. I try to help by being rational and not getting caught up in emotions. I explain the inevitability of the disciplinary decision based on school rules. I can support her best by being logical. Then we can have a rational discussion, and I can help her see all the reasons for this outcome. She knows how strongly I love her; this has nothing to do with that—school rules are school rules.
- b. I try to help by being straightforward and down-to-earth, having a face-to-face talk. We know where we stand, how solidly I love her. This in no way affects that relationship—that doesn't even come into the picture; it's the way things are. She made a mistake. We all do. Face-to-face, saying it straight without any extraneous talk, that's always the best way to handle these interactions.
- c. I try to help by letting her know how much I care. I don't like handling these situations. When my children are in trouble, it strikes at my heart. I'm more anxious about this than I want to admit—emotional upsets really get to me. I know her so well that I know what she's feeling as if it were myself. Although she's in the wrong—and we all know that—I'll try to get through to her how much I love her.



**6. At the last minute your child tells you that he wants to spend his birthday with friends, knowing full well the plans you've made together for the day. What is your first reaction?**

- a. Disbelief—I can't accept this at all. I know he has to grow and become independent, but why now, why on his birthday? We've planned this day for months. He knows how much I love birthdays. I'm so disappointed; it's a heart-wrenching feeling. I'll never get over this one.
- b. I guess I should have seen this coming. He made noises about this last year. He's growing up—all the signs are there—I just didn't think they would come down on this day. If you think about it rationally and logically, it's a perfectly legitimate request—shows healthy growth. I allowed myself to be blindsided by my own expectations. I'll learn other good lessons from this. Of course he wants to be with his friends, have his own experiences and memories. I won't take this personally.
- c. I'm upset and angry about this. It's about honoring commitments. It's that simple, you don't let people down at the last moment. He should have given me an inkling, a clue, not gone along making plans without saying a word. You get slammed in this world, one way or the other, even by your own children. The anger is overwhelming; I feel it in my whole body. I'll count to ten, but he must know how unfair this is.

**7. You want to be a great parent—your dreams reflect the deepest parts of yourself. Your passion for your vision stems from:**

- a. A feeling that I have something my children can relate to. I believe I've got what it takes to put across my vision in a way that's honest, good, and effective. It's all about people. I can get through to people, I'm in tune, and I understand

people. I want my children to have this, too. In my heart I know this is true.

- b. A hunch, an instinct that I'm in the right place at the right time doing what I'm meant to be doing. When my head, heart, and gut are aligned behind something, I can trust that sense. I can put my full force behind it. I would never commit to being a parent if I didn't feel 100 percent about it. I'm a 110 percent parent.
- c. The knowledge that I have first-rate ideas about parenting that will benefit my children. I wouldn't be involved in anything if I weren't convinced of the validity of my ideas, hadn't thought things through, and that includes being a parent. If I weren't absolutely sure of my thinking, I wouldn't be putting myself on the line.

**8. You want to run for an open slot on the PTA. You feel confident you can handle the job and make a contribution to the life of your child's school because:**

- a. Of my proven record as an idea person. No one can question that what I do is conceptually sound. My references attest to my theoretical ability and know-how. I'm as intellectually solid as anyone on the PTA.
- b. Of my track record for getting through to people. Whether it's coaching Little League, attending a meeting of the choral-society committee, or volunteering at the community center, I've always been able to put across what I believe so that people will want to be part of it. I know people; people are my life. I can get the world on board.
- c. Of the fact that I just know this is right for me now. I can fit right in to the PTA. I have reliable instincts. I've proven it to myself and others time and again. Lots of people have benefited from my instincts. Only something that I believe in absolutely would get me into running in this election. People know where they stand with me, and that makes them feel safe.

**9. Your child writes a paper for class on why you are the best parent in the world. It's published in the school magazine. What's your response?**

- a. This is wonderful—it validates my parenting style. It's great that my child appreciates the way I think through what I do and my intellectual energy. She's picked up on the highly mental approach I bring to all my activities; it's something she can measure and write about. I'm pleased.
- b. It's gratifying, but her paper isn't about me. I'm not what I do. It's about her, how perceptive and a good writer she is. This paper's being published won't change things one way or the other: it won't make me a better person, or bring more meaning to my life, or change my relationship with her. I'll just go on being the same parent I've always been.
- c. I know I'm a good parent, so I deserve this validation, but there are lots of good parents. What's important is that my child wrote about *me*. That means the world to me. That she knows me so well, values me, is connected to me, and wants to acknowledge me this way. That really pleases me.

### ***How Do I Think? How Do I Feel?***

Now that you've completed the exercise, locate your choices on the chart below. Your dominant mode is reflected by the area with the most choices. You may find you have made some choices that do not indicate this mode. There are sound reasons for this that have to do with the shifts you make from your dominant mode when you are under stress or in a particularly secure situation. *Nonetheless, your dominant mode is the one that shows the most circled choices.*

#### **Feeling Mode (Attacher)**

1a, 2b, 3b, 4a, 5c, 6a, 7a, 8b, 9c

#### **Mental Mode (Detacher)**

1c, 2c, 3a, 4b, 5a, 6b, 7c, 8a, 9a

### **Instinctual Mode (Defender)**

1b, 2a, 3c, 4c, 5b, 6c, 7b, 8c, 9b

Research on personality shows that we make our way in the world primarily as *Attachers*, *Detachers*, or *Defenders*. My nomenclature—Attacher, Detacher, Defender—is based on the respected work of the pioneering psychologist Karen Horney who, in her book *Our Inner Conflicts*, describes three broad personality patterns as those of *moving toward people*, *moving away from people*, and *moving against people*. I developed the terminology *Attachers* (who move toward people), *Detachers* (who move away from people), and *Defenders* (who move against people) by aligning my work with hers. People are a complex fusion of these three ways of being, but one is always dominant.

### **Are You an Attacher?**

If your predominant mode of being is emotional, you are activated by your feelings, and these moods and emotions you feel each day affect all that you do. They're the inner triggers that direct your behavior. The Attacher motivation can be described as outer-directed behavior, *moving toward people*, a way of making sense of and operating in the world through connection to people and relationships. The emotional context is the Attachers' environment.

You are aware of the feelings of others and how you are coming across. Therefore, issues of image are important. Some Attachers take pride in denying to themselves that they have feelings. Others suspend their feelings, so they don't interfere with getting the job done. Yet others are constantly aware of feelings and can lose their agenda if they allow their feelings to overwhelm them. All use feelings to open their hearts to others and to the deepest parts of themselves.

Attachers are centrally preoccupied with where they stand emotionally in relation to others. *Do they like me?* The major issue

is *approval*. They enjoy *recognition*. They are aware of the *feelings* of others and of how they are coming across to others. Their defenses are marshaled around feelings: to make their way in the world, they have to learn to deal with feelings.

### ***Key Issues for Attachers***

***Image:*** “How am I coming across? What image am I conveying? How are people responding to me?”

***Connection:*** “Am I reaching out? Am I getting through? Am I making contact?”

***Approval:*** “Do they approve of me? Do they like me?”

*There are three types of parenting personalities most commonly found among Attachers: the Helper, the Organizer, and the Dreamer.*

### ***The Helper Parent***

Helpers connect with others by being helpful. They can feel the needs of others because they are acutely sensitive to other people’s feelings. What motivates them at work and at home is knowing what others need and being of help. Helpers convey feelings of warmth, understanding, and genuine concern. Sometimes they feel frustrated because they’re not able to do as much for others as they would like.

To feel comfortable with others, Helpers align by being sincere and quietly empathic, firm and plain-talking, or whatever works for the person with whom they are interacting. Their conversation is based on personal appeal. The underlying message is “Look what I can do for you. You need my help. I’m here to serve you.” They pitch their conversations to elicit approval. Approval is the bottom line.