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INTRODUCTION

TAILORING YOUR PARENTING TO YOUR CHILD'S TEMPERAMENT

Is your child clinging to you at the door when you try to drop them off at a birthday party, too scared to join the party? Or is your child so excited to get to the party that they dart into the street even after you tell them to stay right by the car? Or does your child not even make it to the party because they are so frustrated and angry about having to wear a jacket that they break down into a crying and yelling fit? And do you feel self-conscious that other parents view you as ineffective with our out-of-control child?

Some of these challenging behaviors from our children can stem from their *temperament*—the emotional and self-regulation characteristics that they are born with. Many children present with challenges in their emotional and behavioral responses to everyday situations, and these can be stressful for parents and families. In addition, children with particular temperamental emotion and behavior characteristics can face an increased risk for social, emotional, and behavioral problems, such as anxiety, depression, or oppositional problems, in particular when they experience stress or adversity. These temperament-driven behaviors can be overwhelming to parents who might not know the most effective way to deal with them. Most important, children can present these challenging behaviors for very different underlying reasons depending on their

temperament, and parents can be more effective if they understand the source of their children's reactions.

It's not always clear what is the most effective way to deal with these behaviors. Should a parent use more negative consequences? More rewards? Be more firm? More gentle? Pick your battles? Stick to your guns? Sometimes, parents receive conflicting advice that is confusing without a better sense of the temperament characteristics underlying challenging behaviors.

Most parents who have more than one child will tell you that what worked with one didn't necessarily work with the other. They felt like they knew what they were doing—until their second one came along, and nothing worked the same. Or ask parents with one child who just seemed more demanding than their friends' kids were about the experience of receiving their friends' judgments about how “that's what only-kids are like.” Little, if any, parenting wisdom or advice that is available to parents provides the critical understanding of the role of children's temperament in shaping children's behavior and our parenting.

We wrote this book to clarify how different temperament characteristics can lead to challenging emotional and behavioral responses from children and to explain how parents can tailor their parenting to better support their children's positive development with different temperament characteristics in mind. We offer specific parenting approaches to address these different temperament characteristics. We hope the book provides important insight and practical suggestions to every parent, giving an understanding of children's temperament, that is, their motivational styles, emotional reactions, self-control, their strengths, and areas that require extra support. The recommendations in this book are most helpful to parents with younger children, infants through grade school ages, although parents with tweens and teens might also benefit from a better understanding of their children's emotional reactions, motivations, and ability to self-regulate.

We begin the book by defining and describing children's temperament using the most current research perspectives based on our own work and studies conducted by leading experts in the field. We provide information about the underlying neurobiological systems so that parents can have a better understanding of how children's motivational and emotional tendencies drive their behaviors. By understanding the neurobiological systems underlying the behaviors and physiology-behavior relationships, parents can gain a broader perspective and develop more empathy for the behaviors as well as gain a better understanding of how to effectively address them. We then lay out how specific temperament characteristics can lead parents to react in particular ways to their children and how their children might react differently to parenting. We focus on the temperament characteristics that have been shown to pose challenges for parents or that are related to increased likelihood of social, emotional, or behavioral problems in children. The focus is on how parents can support children's positive development and work most effectively with their children to promote their well-being.

ABOUT US

Throughout this book, we use the first-person singular voice ("I") whenever one of us is relating an example from her own personal or professional life. We will clarify who is speaking when we do this.

Liliana J. Lengua

I (Liliana) am a University of Washington professor of psychology and the founding director of the Center for Child and Family Well-Being. I conduct research on how children and parents react differently to each other on the basis of children's temperament characteristics, as well as how parents can support their children's unique characteristics

while also shaping them into strengths and positive social–emotional outcomes. I also study how children’s temperament contributes to their social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment in response to stress and adversity. In addition, I am a clinical psychologist, and in community workshops and my past practice I have worked to help parents be more effective by facilitating their understanding of their children’s unique motivations and emotional reactions. I have published more than 150 scholarly articles and chapters on temperament; parenting; and children’s social, emotional, and behavioral responses to stress and adversity. Finally, I am a mother of three children, each with a unique temperament profile and each presenting his or her own challenges, insights, cherished qualities, and engaging stories of parenting experiences. I call them my “temperament lab at home.”

When my oldest child was born, she didn’t cry or make a sound for a couple of minutes. When the doctor handed her to me, she looked stunned. Her eyes were wide saucers, her neck stretched out, and her head turned side to side. And then she started to wail. She cried and arched her back and flailed. The nurse encouraged me to try breastfeeding her, but she arched away and turned her head. My husband took her and tried to walk around with her, holding her close to his chest. After several minutes of trying, he tried putting a pacifier in her mouth, as the nurse suggested. After that didn’t work, a nurse tried soothing her.

My daughter continued to cry, with each nurse on that shift coming in to take her turn at trying to calm her. I tried breastfeeding again. Another nurse tried giving her a bit of sugar; another tried swaddling her. She was going on an hour of crying at the point when there was a shift change, and all the new nurses on the next shift tried their tricks for soothing infants. Finally, after almost two hours straight of inconsolable crying, a nurse brought in a tub of warm water and held her in it. She finally quieted, and afterward nursed and let me, and then my husband, hold her as she slept.

Because of my research experience on children's temperament, I knew this was a sign that my daughter was probably going to be a reactive child. But even though I knew about this aspect of her temperament, I did not have very specific guidance about what I should do differently or how I could effectively respond to my daughter's reactivity. In fact, even as research on the interplay between parenting and children's temperament has burgeoned in the past 40 years, very little of that research has been translated into meaningful guidance for parents about how to effectively interact with their children who have different temperament characteristics. Until recently, if you did a web search on the term "temperament," you were more likely to find information about the temperament of dogs and horses than about children. Even today, most of the information available to parents is based on a model of temperament that was developed in the 1950s.

Although my daughter's temperament made some things challenging, it also made some things easier, like teaching her about dangers to avoid or getting her to follow rules and expectations, and her reactivity helped her grow into a conscientious, responsible teen who was passionate about social issues and cared deeply about her siblings and friends.

My second child was equally challenging, but in a way that was entirely different from his older sister. Mind you, I thought I had had my temperamental child in my first one. I didn't think it was statistically likely that I would have a second one, let alone one who was completely different! I thought that, given the genetics of temperament, I would be likely to have another child who was challenging in similar ways. I did not expect to be challenged in the ways my son presented. It was like learning parenting all over again, trying to figure out what would be effective with my son, because most of the things I did with my daughter weren't working as well with him.

My third child was much more composed and calm, soothable, and easygoing. However, she was often very persistent and

inflexible, and she presented different challenges that raising two children already hadn't provided insights about.

Let me say at the outset that I treasure each of my children deeply, and there is (almost) nothing I would change about any of them. In fact, my "temperament lab at home" provided me with tremendous insight into parenting, which has informed my research and provided me with greater humility and compassion in this parenting endeavor we undertake. But I never dreamed what a wild ride it would be to have three dramatically different children, and I was not prepared for how differently I had to parent each of them. Keep in mind that I'm a child psychologist, who researches temperament and has substantial knowledge about parenting, and even I wasn't ready for it.

Maria A. Gartstein

I (Maria, or "Masha") am a Washington State University professor and chair of the psychology department. I am a clinical psychologist who specializes in work with children and families in my practice and supervision and a developmental scientist in my laboratory. My research focuses on early childhood temperament and how these emerging traits are related to parenting and the ways in which caregivers interact with young children. I have focused on both biological and environmental factors that play a role in how children's unique characteristics develop, and I have conducted studies that focused on so-called "child effects," increasing our understanding of how children's temperament shapes parenting and caregiving they receive. Because of this work, I was asked to contribute to a Netflix documentary titled "Babies," specifically, the episode titled "Nature and Nurture." I have authored more than 100 peer-reviewed scholarly publications, along with book chapters and scientific presentations. As a parent, I have faced a number of temperament-related

challenges, which provided further insights I am eager to share with parents and providers who work with children and families.

My story of translating scientific knowledge about temperament into parenting differs in details from Liliana's but also shares a common theme—A long-standing program of temperament research did not prepare me fully for challenges of my own child's temperament. I had my daughter later in life, thinking that all of the scientific knowledge I was able to gain pursuing a concentrated study of how temperament develops, what combination of nature and nurture shapes this development, and how it ultimately contributes to risk or protects the child from maladjustment and mental health issues would give me an advantage. When my daughter and I just met each other and were still in the hospital, I was pleased to hear all of the nurses comment on how alert she was. I thought it would be great to have a child so interested in what was going on in the world around her. As she grew, this interest turned into a lot of activity, pursuing different things that seemed to promise a reward of some kind. In fact, she skipped crawling altogether, moving right to standing, walking, running, and climbing. One night, I came into her bedroom after hearing her crying to discover that she had pulled herself up to a standing position in her crib and then was not sure how to get back down. I will never forget our first day at a local gymnastics club for their “wobble worms” class; it was one of the happiest days of my life. For the first time since she had begun walking, running, and climbing, it was safe to let her do all the things she had been wanting to do so badly. I learned that day that one of the biggest challenges for me would be to channel her zest for life, all things interesting and potentially rewarding, in a safe, healthy, and productive direction. This work continues today.

When she became a toddler, being so interested and driven to explore meant that every time we went out for a meal, she wanted to visit the restroom on multiple occasions, leading me to develop a rule: Only two visits to the restroom per restaurant outing. The other

rule that quickly became a necessity was “When I say it’s time to go, it’s time to go!” There were definitely a few times when she tested this rule, with me carrying her out of play areas and other locations and other parents looking at me with judgment in their eyes, but over time we began to understand each other. Being consistent in setting this limit ultimately paid off, and one day at a playground we called the “big kids’ slide” she said, “I know, I know . . . When it’s time to go, it’s time to go.” I also learned that sometimes I had to back away from rules and limitations, because enforcing them meant I ended up feeling very bad about being a parent. One time, a misbehavior led me to say to my daughter that if she was not able to follow my instruction on the third time it was given, she would not be going to a friend’s birthday party. You can probably anticipate how this ended: She did not go to the party, and I had to call the birthday girl’s parents and apologize, which left me feeling like the worst mother ever. This situation resulted in me deciding I would avoid power struggles before important events, even if it meant compromising on things I normally would not. I can share many similar examples, and our relationship is still a work in progress. However, this foundation, which mixed consistency with flexibility on my part, gave us a solid start.

SHARING TEMPERAMENT INSIGHTS WITH PARENTS

In the 1950s, Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess (1977) conducted a small but groundbreaking study on infant temperament. At that time, the overwhelming consensus was that all of our behavior, everything we do and who we are, was the result of *nurture*, learned starting in infancy. This behaviorist perspective indicated that we became who we are through imitation, modeling, socialization, and living through experiences. Thomas and Chess put a crack in that perspective when they interviewed parents of infants and discovered notable differences

in infant sleep and eating patterns, crying frequency and intensity, soothability, sensitivity, adaptability, and flexibility to changes around them. Thomas and Chess put something new on the table—the notion that children come into the world with individual differences in certain characteristics, that is, *nature*—and that parents respond differently to children depending on their temperament. For the next 30 years, research on children's temperament and the role it plays in parenting and in children's social, emotional, and behavioral well-being grew, chipping away at prior conceptions that all of these individual differences were the result of nurture, or learning.

Then, in the 1980s, new research by Mary Rothbart (2007) advanced our understanding of children's temperament by linking observed individual differences to neurobiological systems that might account for them and fine-tuning our understanding of how these underlying systems lead to individual differences in children's reactions to their environment and experiences. Unfortunately, information stemming from this refined model has not yet reached parents or been made accessible as useful information to guide parenting children with different, and sometimes challenging, temperament characteristics. This is our primary goal in this book.

In this book, we share research-based knowledge about children's temperament and how it leads children to respond uniquely to parenting efforts as validated through clinical and personal experiences. We provide a summary of the most current understanding of children's temperament, the biological systems and physiological processes that underlie important differences in children's perspectives of and reactions to the world, their motivations and drives in different situations, and their capacity to modulate or manage their own reactions. We share recommendations based on the findings of the past 40 years of research that provide insight into how parents respond differently to different temperament characteristics in their children and what parenting behaviors work best for which children.

Most important, we offer suggestions for parenting strategies that work best at guiding our temperamentally challenging children to more adaptive pathways over time, at different points in their development. Our ultimate hope is to provide parents tools to help them to be effective in responding to their children's sometimes challenging, sometimes frustrating, sometimes heartbreaking, often endearing, delightful, puzzling, overwhelming, and enjoyable behaviors so that parents can be more effective in raising socially, emotionally, and behaviorally well-adjusted children.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

In Part I of this book we introduce definitions of temperament and parenting behaviors that we discuss throughout the book. We start with a description of what temperament is (Chapter 1), the behaviors associated with different temperament characteristics (Chapter 2), and the biological systems that are the basis for children's temperament (Chapter 3). We then introduce the four core parenting principles that are most often associated with children's positive development and well-being (Chapter 4).

In Part II, we discuss the temperament characteristics that, when very strong, can present challenges related to children's social, emotional, and behavioral development and well-being. These include being very fearful or very fearless (Chapter 5), easily frustrated (Chapter 6), impulsive (Chapter 7), and inflexible (Chapter 8). We explore how these characteristics are experienced by parents and discuss which parenting behaviors tend to be effective with each particular temperament characteristic.

In Part III, we offer a toolkit of parenting practices that allow parents to be more responsive to and effective with their children's temperament. This includes practices for being present (Chapter 9), being warm (Chapter 10), being balanced (Chapter 11), and being

consistent (Chapters 12 and 13). You might think of this book as being like a cookbook, where Part II gives broad advice on how to cook (or, in our case, how to parent) and Part III provides specific recipes (or, in our case, specific practices and exercises). Throughout the chapters in Part II, we refer you to the tools described in Part III. You might find yourself going back and forth between chapters in Parts II and III. We invite you to read the book out of order, if you find that useful, and to try out some of the parenting practices as you read through the chapters in Part II.

Finally, in our appendixes we offer questionnaires to help you assess your own family situation. Appendix A will help you evaluate your child's temperament characteristics, and Appendix B will help you evaluate your own parenting in terms of the core parenting principles presented in this book. We provide these temperament and parenting assessment tools in part because, in our work with families, parents routinely express an interest in being able to benchmark their own efforts, and they have often told us how responding to questions about child temperament made them better observers of their children's behaviors and increased their appreciation of their meaning. We invite you to use the information about temperament in Parts I and II, the parenting practices in Part III, and the questionnaires in the Appendixes in ways that are most helpful for enhancing your enjoyment of your child and effectiveness in supporting your child's positive development and well-being.