

# Exploding the Myth of the Ideal Parent

By Janet Penley, MBA

*Summary: Good parents come in many styles. There is no one “right” way to be a good parent. Each of us brings strengths to parenting that feel as natural as breathing. The good news is that you no longer have to covet your neighbor's style. You have your own and your own strengths.*



Janet Penley, MBA

When I became a mother, I so wanted to do it right. I attended parenting classes and tried to do everything by the book. I disciplined with logical consequences, used time-outs, and invited my child's age plus one to birthday parties.

Then one Saturday morning, while I was carefully arranging the matching plates and napkins for my six-year-old son's birthday, he bounced in to inspect the decorations. “Get out of here!” I shrieked, “Can't you see I'm trying to make a nice birthday for you?” The irony of my words hit me. I had tried to do everything right yet it felt so wrong. In that moment I decided that perhaps I should stop turning outward for answers and start tuning into my own values, beliefs and way of being.



Many organizations use a framework of personality type developed by Carl Jung and measured by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® assessment to talk about the pros and cons of different management styles. I wondered, why not parenting styles, as well? After more than a decade of research and study, I have come to understand how personality type can help parents understand their strengths and struggles in parenting. After hundreds of interviews and workshops, two truths have emerged:

- Good parents come in many styles. There is no one “right” way to be a good parent. Each of us brings strengths to parenting that feel as natural as breathing.
- Every parent is a mixed bag. No matter what, we'll never erase our humanness. Fortunately, children don't need perfect parents because, as human beings, they themselves will never be perfect either.

## What's Your Parenting Style?

Your personality type is determined by your preference in four categories: energy, attention, decision-making, and lifestyle. In each pair, choose which description seems more like you.

### Energy:

**Extraverted parents** are energized by going, doing, interacting and experiencing. They are typically “in the know” and get children out to experience the world. Too much time isolated at home can make them feel shaky and ungrounded. They are uncomfortable with a child who is more of a loner and needs a lot of solitude.

**Introverted parents** are energized by solitude and time alone. They are observant, reflective and prefer one-on-one interactions. They know their children as individuals and provide them with “downtime” to unwind and recharge. Drained by too much interaction, they must guard their energy to make it through the day without

exploding.

### Attention:

**Sensing parents** focus on details and specifics. They attend to practicalities and the here and now. Hands-on parents, they see to children's basic needs and do concrete activities with them. They struggle to join in a child's imagination or understand a child who is different. They can get stuck in a rut.

### Decision-making:

**Thinking parents** trust logic, objectivity and impersonal analysis. They let children do for themselves, foster independence and answer children's why's in order to fuel their rational development. They struggle to tune in to and be patient with children's irrational feelings.

### Lifestyle:

**Judging parents** are intentional parents who like structure, plans, limits, and order. They are adept at organizing day-to-day living so kids feel secure and don't miss out. They aim to get things done, on time, and in the right way, but struggle to adapt to the unexpected, relax and have fun.

**16 Types:** With this framework, there are sixteen different personality types, and that means sixteen different parenting styles - each with unique gifts. For example, my type is Introversion-Intuition-Feeling-Judging (INFJ) and I'm the "Know Thyself" Parent. My son is my opposite, Extraversion-Sensing-Thinking-Perceiving (ESTP). Knowing type has helped us turn a potentially disastrous parent-child relationship into one that is mutually respectful and fun. It can make you a more effective parent too.

**Intuitive parents** focus on the big picture and possibilities. They quickly leap from facts to patterns and themes. They encourage children's creativity and imagination, point up options and offer them choices. Drained by the nitty-gritty, they struggle to deal with practicalities and be realistic.

**Feeling parents** rely on values, feelings and personal information to decide. They strive to be physically and emotionally close, attuned to children's feelings, and go to great lengths to make them happy. Seeking family harmony, they struggle to say no and be firm if it may cause conflict.

**Perceiving parents** take things as they come and keep their options open. They are flexible and spontaneous, and generally tolerant and accepting of children. They enjoy hanging out and can be relaxed about clutter, but struggle to do chores regularly and keep the house in order.



**How to Recharge Your Batteries:** Each of us finds different aspects of parenting draining and has a unique way to recharge. Your personality type can help you devise a daily nutrition plan for your psychic energy – what to avoid and what gives you energy. If you have enough energy, you'll do your best parenting. When you are running low on energy, you are more apt to make the mistakes you regret later.

### What you need to maintain your energy:

**Extraversion:** Adult conversation, action, variety

**Introversion:** Privacy and time alone

**Sensing:** Feeding five senses, rich sensory stimulation

**Intuition:** New ideas, perspectives, dreams

**Thinking:** Objective validation of competence

**Feeling:** A break from others needs

**Judging:** A place or project to organize, control, complete



**Perceiving:** Freedom from a tight schedule

## Be More Savvy about Volunteering

Volunteer opportunities can help you meet your psychological needs, but choose wisely based on your personality type. Select activities that energize you. Thinking mothers may gravitate toward leadership or money-management positions. Judging mothers may enjoy organizing and accomplishing a finite project. Intuitives may like to get involved in strategy and change. Introverted types need something they can concentrate on and do alone. In general, go with your strengths and find a niche that draws primarily on your personality preferences. Occasionally, you may want to get involved in doing something that is totally “not you” for your own self-development. But do it mindfully and in the spirit of play and experimentation.

Avoid jobs that overuse your non-preferences and drain you in the same way parenting does. As an Introverted-Intuitive, I find the people interaction and practicalities of mothering draining. So I know not to add more. I wouldn't sign up to help assemble a mailing or go on a lot of field trips. Perceiving moms should avoid long-term commitments and routine assignments. One Perceiving mom enjoys being a lunchroom substitute. She actually loves getting a last minute call to help out, but would hate to have to show up the same day each week.

---

*Janet Penley, founder of [Mothers of Many Styles](#) (1998), and co-author of [The M.O.M.S. Handbook](#), has developed M.O.M.S. from 15 years of research and interviews with hundreds of mothers. A popular community lecturer, she has given more than 600 seminars and presentations nationally on parenting styles and family interactions. Learn more about Penley and her work at <http://www.motherstyles.com/default.asp>*