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PARENT APPROACH AND AVOIDANCE TEMPERAMENTS AND PARENTING BEHAVIORS: CHILD BEHAVIORS AS MODERATING MECHANISMS

Stéphane Duchesne and Geneviève Boisclair-Châteauvert

Abstract: Parents' temperaments are assumed to be involved in their parenting behaviors, but empirical evidence is limited. Using self-determination theory (SDT) as a guiding framework, this study examined the associations between parents' approach and avoidance temperaments and parenting behaviors over a 7 month period. Children's manifestations of inattention and prosociality were explored as moderators. A sample of 101 parents (79% mothers) with a child in Grade 4 or Grade 6 participated in this study. Findings indicate that approach temperament positively predicted autonomy-supportive and structuring behaviors, while avoidance temperament positively predicted controlling behaviors. Distinct association patterns were also observed for involvement and structure depending on the children's behavioral characteristics: approach-oriented parents were more likely to engage in structuring behaviors with low prosocial and highly inattentive children. Moreover, avoidance-oriented parents, although less likely overall to employ structuring behaviors, were also more prone to adopt those behaviors when engaging with low prosocial children. Results suggest that SDT-based parenting responses (autonomy support, structure, involvement) as well as controlling responses to children's behaviors may be driven by parents' approach and avoidance dispositions. Implications for theory, research, and the prevention of negative parenting behaviors are presented.

Keywords: parent temperament, parenting behaviors, child behaviors, self-determination theory

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High-quality parenting is requisite for the healthy development of children (Bornstein, 2016; Grolnick & Lerner, 2023; Pomerantz et al., 2019). In the self-determination theory (SDT) framework (Ryan & Deci, 2017), high-quality parenting typically refers to behaviors characterized by high levels of autonomy support, involvement, and structure, combined with low levels of control. In recent decades, numerous studies have demonstrated that individual differences in youths' psychological, academic, and socioemotional functioning were closely linked with these behaviors (see Grolnick & Lerner, 2023; Ratelle & Duchesne, 2017; Soenens et al., 2017). The research findings can be summarized into two points: (a) positive parenting behaviors (autonomy support, involvement, and structure) promote optimal child functioning; and (b) controlling methods and tactics predispose children to adverse functioning outcomes. Given the critical implications of these parenting behaviors, it is of primary importance to identify the factors and mechanisms that facilitate or hinder their adoption.

Family systems literature (e.g., Belsky, 1984; Holden, 2009) has stressed that parenting behaviors are driven, in part, by parents' personality characteristics. Empirical studies that provided support for this claim (e.g., Prinzie et al., 2009) have focused mainly on trait adjectives (e.g., extraverted, neurotic). However, other personality characteristics could also be of interest for parenting research and prevention practices. In recent years, two basic systems (approach and avoidance temperaments) have been proposed as an underlying basis for other personality traits, including extraversion and neuroticism (Elliot & Thrash, 2010). Because these temperamental constructs are presumed to explain individual differences in reactivity to stimuli and events, it is plausible that they contribute to parenting behaviors. So far, no study has been carried out to examine this possibility.

In addition, children's behavioral dispositions have been identified as key factors that affect the personality–parenting relation (e.g., Koenig et al., 2010; Somers et al., 2024). Accordingly, the current study explores the moderating role of children's inattention and prosocial behaviors. Inattention (e.g., Döpfner et al., 2015) and prosociality (e.g., Shi et al., 2021) have been found to be relatively stable across time, and to have a tendency to elicit opposite parenting responses: a controlling response for inattention (e.g., Haack et al., 2016) and a positive response for prosociality (e.g., Pastorelli et al., 2016). Considering these trait-like behaviors could help specify the conditions in which parents' temperamental dispositions predict their parenting behaviors.

Parenting From the SDT Perspective

SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017) is a macro-theory of personality that posits that all individuals, including children, have three essential psychological needs that must be fulfilled to develop their full potential: autonomy (experience of volition), competence (experience of self-efficacy), and relatedness (experience of connection with others). According to SDT, these needs can be supported or thwarted depending on four types of behavior on the part of parents and other socialization figures: autonomy support, structure, involvement, and control (Farkas & Grolnick, 2010; Ratelle & Duchesne, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2017). *Autonomy support* involves taking into account children's perspectives and feelings; communicating in an empathetic manner; providing meaningful explanations of the reasons for expectations; providing opportunities to make choices, when possible; and assigning developmentally appropriate responsibilities. *Involvement* refers to the allocation of emotional and tangible resources to children such as time, genuine interest, and encouragement. *Structure* involves creating a predictable environment for children by communicating rules and expectations; providing a rationale for rules and expectations; explaining the consequences of not following rules or meeting expectations; giving informative feedback; and enacting a leadership role. Finally, *control* refers to the use of methods and practices (e.g., threats, conditional negative regard, reward or punishment contingencies) intended to pressure children, dominate them, or change their thoughts and behaviors.

Several studies have investigated SDT-based parenting behaviors in relation to a wide range of child and adolescent functioning indicators (for exhaustive reviews, see Joussemet et al., 2008; Pomerantz et al., 2019; Raftery et al., 2012; Ratelle & Duchesne, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2017). In essence, the findings revealed that at least one of autonomy support, involvement, and structure was positively associated with need satisfaction, academic competence, autonomous motivation, effective self-regulation, school performance, peer acceptance, and well-being. By contrast, control was related to need frustration, poor school performance, and anxiety. These robust and well-documented conclusions thus raise an important question: what are the factors that predispose parents to adopt these behaviors? In this regard, parent personality has been identified as one of the most proximal sources of influence (Belsky, 1984; Holden, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Yet, despite its significance, this factor has been relatively neglected in the SDT perspective, while studies have focused mainly on characteristics such as parental achievement goals (Mageau et al., 2016), authenticity (Roth et al., 2016), contingent self-esteem (Israeli-Halevi et al., 2015; Ng et al., 2014; Wuyts et al., 2015), and maladaptive perfectionism (Soenens et al., 2006) in association with autonomy-supportive or controlling behaviors. The present study seeks to extend this literature by examining parents' temperamental dispositions towards approach and avoidance as predictors of all four parenting behaviors — autonomy support, structure, involvement, and control.

Parent Approach and Avoidance Temperaments as Potential Contributors to Parenting Behaviors

Temperament is a biologically based construct that encompasses stable individual differences in reactivity and regulation (Putnam et al., 2019; Rothbart & Bates, 2006; Rothbart & Derryberry, 1981). Research on personality has traditionally recognized the existence of two temperamental dispositions that impact emotional reactivity: approach and avoidance (see for example, Zuckerman, 2012). These basic dispositions are integral to the distinction between approach and avoidance temperaments (Elliot & Thrash, 2002, 2010). Conceptually, both temperaments reflect a neurobiological sensitivity (vigilance, reactivity) to valenced stimuli. Specifically, *approach temperament* designates a motivational tendency to approach desirable and rewarding stimuli and to experience positive emotions (e.g., joy) in the presence of these stimuli. In contrast, *avoidance temperament* denotes a sensitivity to undesirable and punishing stimuli and a disposition to feel negative emotions (e.g., fear) in the presence of unpleasant stimuli. These temperaments have been closely linked to other fundamental dimensions of personality such as *extraversion*, predicted by approach temperament, and *neuroticism*, predicted by avoidance temperament (Elliot & Thrash, 2010). It thus appears that people who are oriented towards positive stimuli (approach temperament) tend to be active, sociable, and prone to positive affects (i.e., high in extraversion); whereas those oriented towards negative stimuli (avoidance temperament) are more disposed to emotional instability and negative affects (i.e., high in neuroticism).

To our knowledge, no study has investigated the links between parents' approach and avoidance temperaments and parenting behaviors. Because stable personality factors are viewed as proximal determinants of parenting behaviors (Belsky, 1984; Bornstein, 2016; Lengua et al., 2025), it is reasonable to assume that these temperamental dispositions may also be involved in how parents socialize their children. Indirect support for this proposal comes from studies that have linked parents' extraversion and neuroticism traits to parenting constructs (e.g., Bornstein et al., 2011; Clark et al., 2000; Coplan et al., 2009; Karreman et al., 2008; Koenig et al., 2010; Mangelsdorf et al., 1990; Prinzie et al., 2009). For example, in a meta-analysis of 30 studies (Prinzie et al., 2009), extraversion was positively associated with warmth in parenting (e.g., positive support) and behavioral control (e.g., structure). Conversely, neuroticism was negatively related to warmth, behavioral control, and autonomy support (e.g., low intrusiveness). Furthermore, high extraversion (in fathers) and low neuroticism (in mothers) were positively related to responsiveness and positive emotions (Koenig et al., 2010). In addition, neuroticism was negatively associated with authoritative parenting (e.g., warmth, reasoning) and positively associated with the use of coercive practices (Coplan et al., 2009). Finally, extraversion in mothers was positively related to self-reported parenting competence; neuroticism had the inverse association (Bornstein et al., 2011).

In summary, the general trend that emerges from the empirical literature linking personality traits to parenting behaviors is that extraversion could predispose parents to better parenting cognitions (e.g., belief in one's competence) and behaviors (e.g., being caring and supportive) than neuroticism can. Because these traits have also been associated with, but are distinct from, approach (extraversion) and avoidance (neuroticism) temperaments (Elliot & Thrash, 2010), these temperaments could help to explain individual variations in parenting behaviors. Additionally, SDT-based studies have identified parental personality characteristics as predictors of parenting that could theoretically be related to approach and avoidance temperaments. While parental authenticity can reflect a temperamental approach orientation (e.g., prioritizing one's own preferences, values, and interests), parental maladaptive perfectionism and contingent self-esteem may express an avoidance orientation (e.g., pursuing high personal standards and seeking to reduce failure). For instance, parents with a strong approach temperament could be disposed to present a mindset characterized by positive affects (e.g., capacity for joy), authenticity, and a sense of competence that promotes active and flexible parenting (i.e., autonomy support, involvement, and structure). In contrast, parents with an avoidance temperament could be more inclined to develop a mindset characterized by negative affects (e.g., anger, anxiety, sadness), unrealistically high standards for themselves, and a sense of ineffectiveness that would deplete their personal resources and prompt rigid and controlling parenting behaviors. Although the hypothesized relations between approach and avoidance temperaments and SDT-based parenting behaviors appear plausible, only empirical investigation can confirm this.

An examination of the relation between parents' temperamental dispositions and parenting behaviors would be incomplete without considering child-related factors (Belsky, 1984; Bornstein, 2016; Lengua et al., 2025). Indeed, children have distinct characteristics that may potentially modulate the strength of the proposed associations. Much of the empirical support for this proposition has been provided by studies of preschool and early school-age children that have considered characteristics such as negative affectivity (Clark et al., 2000), emotional dysregulation (Coplan et al., 2009), problem behaviors (Atzaba-Poria et al., 2014), and anger proneness (Koenig et al., 2010). Overall, findings suggest that parents with positive temperamental dispositions (e.g., empathy) tend to adopt supportive behaviors, even when their child displays challenging emotional or behavioral characteristics. In contrast, parents with negative temperamental dispositions (e.g., neuroticism) are more likely to engage in coercive or negative behaviors when their child exhibits such characteristics. However, while these results provide important insights, it seems relevant to explore other characteristics in older children. The present study focuses on children's inattention and prosociality toward the end of elementary school (ages 9–11). These behaviors are promising moderator candidates because they play a critical and distinct role in children's developmental trajectories and socialization practices elicited at home (see Nigg & Barkley, 2014 for inattention; Putnick et al., 2018 for prosociality).

Child Inattention and Prosociality as Moderating Mechanisms

Inattention and prosocial behaviors have been extensively studied in scientific literature. Conceptually, *inattention* refers to difficulties in terms of vigilance, interference control, working memory, organization, planning, flexibility, and perseverance in tasks and activities (Nigg & Barkley, 2014; Willcutt, 2015). In school-aged children, inattention severity was positively associated with problematic behavior at home (Haack et al., 2016), aggressiveness, hyperactivity, and anxiety, but negatively with prosociality (Duchesne et al., 2010). Significant impairment has also been reported in academic functioning, including academic need satisfaction (Duchesne et al., 2022), motivation (Plamondon & Martinussen, 2019), homework performance (Haack et al., 2016; Langberg et al., 2010), and achievement (Duchesne et al., 2014; Massetti et al., 2008). For its part, *prosociality* encompasses a set of positive and purposeful actions (e.g., calming, helping, sharing, cooperating) that aim to enhance others' well-being (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2006). Prosocial behaviors in children have been related to low levels of aggressiveness, hyperactivity, and anxiety (Duchesne et al., 2010), high levels of empathy (Belacchi & Farina, 2012), motivation, and academic performance (Duchesne et al., 2005), and lower probability of high school noncompletion (Vitaro et al., 2005). Together, these findings suggest that children with attention problems are more prone to negative emotionality, poor impulse control, and academic impairment than prosocial children are.

Recent studies have revealed that inattention and prosocial behaviors in children and adolescents were closely associated to parenting quality. Children's inattention was negatively correlated with maternal acceptance (Molina & Musich, 2016), warmth, and behavioral control (Duchesne et al., 2010); but positively correlated with negative parenting (e.g., inconsistent discipline, power assertion; Haack et al., 2016). Similarly, attention problems in adolescents positively predicted maternal rejection (Lifford et al., 2008) and hostility (Lifford et al., 2009). Conversely, prosocial behavior has been linked to more positive parenting practices. For instance, prosocial behavior in children positively predicted maternal sensitivity (Newton et al., 2014), warmth, and lack of neglect (Pastorelli et al., 2016), as well as increased parental acceptance (Putnick et al., 2018). Finally, prosocial behavior in adolescence positively predicted authoritative mothering and fathering (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012). Overall, these findings align with studies reporting that youth with behavioral vulnerabilities tend to elicit more negative parenting behaviors than those without such vulnerabilities (see Bornstein, 2016; Deault, 2010).

The present study explored children's inattentive and prosocial behaviors as moderators of the relation between parental temperament and parenting behaviors. Based on parenting literature (e.g., Bornstein, 2016), it can be argued that parents whose children are prone to challenging behaviors (e.g., high inattention, low prosociality) could respond differently according to their own temperamental dispositions. Theoretically, parents with an approach temperament (positive temperamental disposition) would deal with difficult child behavior in resilient ways (e.g., "these behaviors represent a challenge"), thereby maintaining high-quality parenting (e.g., getting involved, providing structure) and not resorting to controlling practices. In contrast, parents with an avoidance temperament (negative disposition) would react negatively to difficult behaviors (e.g., "these behaviors represent a constraint or a threat"), cope with these behaviors less confidently, and be less likely to respond adequately to their children's needs (e.g., disengaging, using control and disciplinary strategies). Taken together, these findings suggest that parents with a positive personality disposition would respond more favorably to children's behavioral vulnerabilities than parents with a negative disposition.

The Present Study: Goals

This prospective study had two main goals. The first was to examine the contribution of parents' approach and avoidance temperaments to the prediction of SDT-based parenting behaviors. Two hypotheses were formulated: (1) parents' approach temperament would positively predict positive parenting behaviors (i.e., autonomy support, involvement, and structure), but negatively predict control; and (2) parents' avoidance temperament would negatively predict positive parenting behaviors, but positively predict control. The second goal was to explore children's behavioral characteristics of inattention and prosociality as potential moderating mechanisms. Although this goal was exploratory in nature, two general hypotheses derived from theoretical (Elliot & Thrash, 2010) and empirical research (e.g., Koenig et al., 2010) were proposed: (1) parents with an approach temperament were expected to show a stronger tendency to engage in positive parenting behaviors when their child exhibited higher rather than lower behavioral vulnerabilities (high inattention or low prosociality); and (2) parents with an avoidance temperament were expected to show a stronger tendency to adopt controlling behaviors under the same conditions.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The convenience sample used in this study consisted of 101 parents (79% mothers) whose children (62% girls) were in Grade 4 (51.5%) or Grade 6 (48.5%). The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Laval University (approval number 2015-001). Participants were recruited from three French-language public elementary schools in the Quebec City metropolitan area in Quebec, Canada. Participants' mean age was 39.7 years (SD = 4.01). Most (99%) spoke French as their first language, 77% were married or in a common-law relationship, 85% had two or more children, 88% were employed full-time, and 87% had earned a high school or more advanced diploma. A large proportion (45%) reported a family income of $100,000 CAD or more, which is slightly above the median family income for the Quebec metropolitan area at the start of the study ($93,070 CAD; Statistics Canada, 2025).

Participants completed a self-administered paper questionnaire at home at the beginning of the school year (September; Time 1 [T1]) and near the end of the same school year (April; Time 2 [T2]). In addition to sociodemographic information (T1), the items adressed parent temperaments (T1), child behaviors (T1), and parenting behaviors (T2). All measures were administered in French using validated versions. Written informed consent was obtained at T1.

Measures

Parenting behaviors: Two scales were used to measure self-reported parenting behaviors: the Perceived Parental Autonomy Support Scale (P-PASS) and the Multidimensional Parental Structure Scale (MPSS). The P-PASS (Mageau et al., 2004, 2015) was used to assess *Autonomy support* (13 items), *involvement* (4 items), and *control* (12 items). Participants responded to each item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*almost never*) to 7 (*almost always*). Sample items include: "When I try to help my child to do something that is difficult for him/her, I make an effort to see things from his/her perspective" (autonomy support), "I'm sincerely interested in what my child does and in knowing how he/she is doing" (involvement), and "When my child plays without rules or structures, I tell him/her how to be the best at what he/she does" (control). The psychometric properties of the P-PASS have been established (Mageau et al., 2004, 2015; Ratelle et al., 2017, 2018). In this study, the psychometric qualities based on omega coefficients (ω) were satisfactory: ω = .84 for autonomy support, .78 for involvement, and .87 for control.

The MPSS (Ratelle et al., 2018) was used to assess the amount of structure provided by the parent. The scale has 24 items answered on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 6 (*completely like me*). A sample item is, "My child knows our rules and expectations". The MPSS has been established as psychometrically sound (Ratelle et al., 2018). In the current study, 16 items for which the factor loadings were equal to or greater than .40 in the validation study (Ratelle et al., 2018) were retained to shorten the questionnaire. The omega coefficient was .89.

Parent temperament: Parent temperamental dispositions were measured with the Approach-Avoidance Temperament Questionnaire (ATQ; Elliot & Thrash, 2010; Payen, 2011). This scale assesses *approach temperament* (4 items, e.g., "It doesn't take a lot to get me excited and motivated") and *avoidance temperament* (6 items, e.g., "I react very strongly to bad experiences"). Participants responded on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type scale. The validity of the ATQ has been supported in previous studies (e.g., Bipp et al., 2017; Elliot & Thrash, 2010; Payen, 2011). In the present study, the reliability of this scale, examined through omega coefficients, was .70 for approach temperament and .86 for avoidance temperament.

Child inattention and prosociality: Child inattention symptoms were measured using four items (can't concentrate, can't pay attention for long; daydreams or gets lost in his/her thoughts; confused, lost in a fog; poorly coordinated, clumsy) from the attention problems subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Parents responded on a 3-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not true for your child*) to 3 (*very true or often true for your child*). The reliability of the CBCL is well established (e.g., Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). In the present study, the omega coefficient was .76.

Prosocial behaviors were assessed using the Prosocial Behavior Questionnaire (PBQ; Weir & Duveen, 1981). Four items were chosen to create a score that reflects the tendency to help and enhance the well-being of others (comforts a child who is crying or upset; takes the opportunity to praise the work of less able children; shows sympathy to someone who has made a mistake; offers to help a child who is having difficulty with a task). The PBQ was found to be reliable (e.g., Tremblay et al., 1991; Weir & Duveen, 1981). In this study, the omega coefficient was .76.

Statistical Analyses

Two sets of analyses were performed using Mplus (version 8.9; Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2023). Descriptive analyses (means, standard deviations, bivariate correlations) were first conducted on all study variables. A regression model including the four parenting behaviors (autonomy support, involvement, structure, and control) was then performed. Parent temperamental dispositions and child behaviors were introduced as predictors. Four interactions were also added to test the potential moderating effects of child behaviors on the association between parent temperament and parenting behaviors: approach temperament × child inattention, approach temperament × child prosociality, avoidance temperament × child inattention, and avoidance temperament × child prosociality. Regression model analysis was conducted under maximum likelihood robust estimation (MLR), which is robust to non-normality and to the nonindependence of observations. All variables were previously standardized (*z* score) with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1 (Aiken & West, 1991). Effect sizes of regression coefficients were classified as small |.12|, medium |.24|, and large |.40|, and were considered significant if their confidence interval (CI) did not include zero (e.g., Lovakov & Agadullina, 2021).

Missing data: Of a total of 101 participants, 69 (68%) returned a completed questionnaire at T2. A robust full information maximum likelihood (FIML) procedure (Enders, 2022; Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2023) was used to deal with missing data in the regression model. FIML is more reliable than conventional approaches such as deleting missing cases (listwise and pairwise) and mean imputation (e.g., Baraldi & Enders, 2010; Myers, 2011).

Results

As a preliminary step, correlations analyses were conducted to examine the relation between child gender and age and all variables of the study. Only one correlation was found: child age was positively and moderately associated with parental control (r = .28). Considering these results, gender and age were not considered as control variables.

Descriptive Analyses

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations for all study variables. Overall, the average scores for parent temperamental dispositions at T1 were high for approach and moderate for avoidance. In addition, the scores for child behaviors at baseline were low for inattention and relatively high for prosociality. For parenting behaviors at T2, scores were high for autonomy support, involvement, and structure, while the average control score was in the moderate range.

Table 1. *Correlations Among Variables (N = 101) and Descriptive Statistics*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Parent approach temperament	-							
2. Parent avoidance temperament	−.18	-						
3. Child inattention	−.09	.19	-					
4. Child prosociality	.23*	−.06	.04	-				
5. Parent autonomy support	.25*	.02	−.03	.23*	-			
6. Parent involvement	.12	.14	−.19	−.06	.33*	-		
7. Parent structure	.28*	−.15	−.26	.10	.50*	.35*	-	
8. Parent control	−.05	.38*	.13	.10	.14	−.11	.00	-
M	5.39	3.40	1.45	2.26	5.14	6.68	5.29	3.31
SD	0.93	1.38	0.47	0.47	0.74	0.40	0.46	1.20
Range	1–7	1–7	1–3	1–3	1–7	1–7	1–6	1–7

* $p < .05$.

The correlation results revealed that parent approach temperament at T1 was positively associated with child prosociality at T1 and with autonomy-supportive and structuring behaviors at T2. A moderate negative correlation was also found between parental avoidance temperament at T1 and control behaviors at T2. Moreover, moderate to high correlations were obtained between the three positive parenting behaviors (autonomy support, involvement, structure). Finally, a negative correlation was observed between child inattention at T1 and parental structuring behaviors at T2, while a positive association was found between child prosociality at T1 and parental autonomy-supportive behaviors at T2. All these relations were in the expected direction.

Regression Analyses

Table 2 presents the regression results. Standardized regression coefficients indicate that parent approach temperament positively and moderately predicted autonomy-supportive ($\beta = .24$; 95% CI = [.06, .42]) and structuring ($\beta = .26$; 95% CI = [.06, .46]) behaviors over and beyond avoidance temperamental disposition and child behaviors (inattention, prosociality). In addition, parent avoidance temperament positively and largely predicted control behaviors ($\beta = .37$; 95% CI = [.19, .54]). No direct association was found with positive parenting behaviors (autonomy support, involvement, structure). Only one relation was observed for child behaviors: inattention symptoms negatively and moderately predicted parental involvement ($\beta = -.26$; 95% CI = [−.55, .13]). This result should be interpreted with caution due to the overlap of the CI with zero. The explained variance (R^2) is .14 for autonomy support, .13 for involvement, .38 for structure, and .17 for control.

Table 2. *Regression Predicting Parenting Behaviors (N = 101)*

Variable	Autonomy support	Involvement	Structure	Control
Approach temperament	.242*	.111	.258*	.017
Avoidance temperament	.069	.175	−.092	.368*
Child inattention	−.002	−.210	−.139	.039
Child prosociality	.174	−.099	−.018	.142
Approach × Inattention	.134	−.094	.255*	.097
Approach × Prosociality	−.021	−.247*	−.319*	−.001
Avoidance × Inattention	−.048	−.017	−.147	.038
Avoidance × Prosociality	−.076	−.153	−.294*	−.135

* $p < .05$.

An examination of the moderating effects revealed four interactions for parent temperament × child behaviors that contributed to parenting behaviors. As illustrated in Figure 1, the first effect showed that parent temperamental approach disposition positively and largely predicted structuring behaviors for inattentive children ($\beta = .51$; 95% CI = [.20, .83]), whereas no association was observed for children with low or no symptoms (β = .00; 95% CI = [−.35, .36]). The second interaction effect (Figure 2) showed that parent approach temperament positively and largely predicted parental involvement for low prosocial children (β = .36; 95% CI = [.07, .65]). The regression slope of this relation is small and negative for more prosocial children (β = −.14; 95% CI = [−.41, .14]), with overlapping CIs. Similarly, the third effect (Figure 3) revealed that parent approach temperament positively and largely predicted parental structuring behaviors for lower prosocial children (β = .58; 95% CI = [.27, .88]), but with a weak and negative association for highly prosocial children (β = −.06; 95% CI = [−.49, .37]), with overlapping CIs. Finally, one moderating effect was observed for parent avoidance temperament (Figure 4). This dispositional temperament positively and moderately predicted parental structuring behaviors for low prosocial children (β = .20; 95% CI = [−.04, .44]), with slightly overlapping CIs, but a negative and large relation was found for more prosocial children (β = −.39; 95% CI = [−.71, −.06]).

Figure 1. *Interaction Effect Between Parent Approach Temperament and Child Inattention, Predicting Parental Structure*

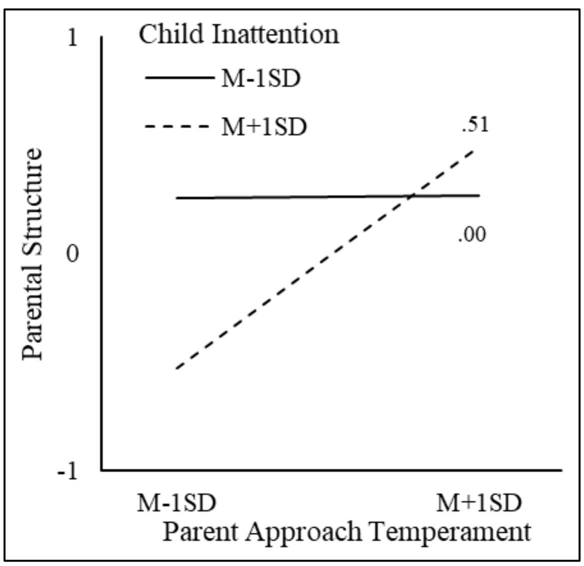


Figure 2. *Interaction Effect Between Parent Approach Temperament and Child Prosociality, Predicting Parental Involvement*

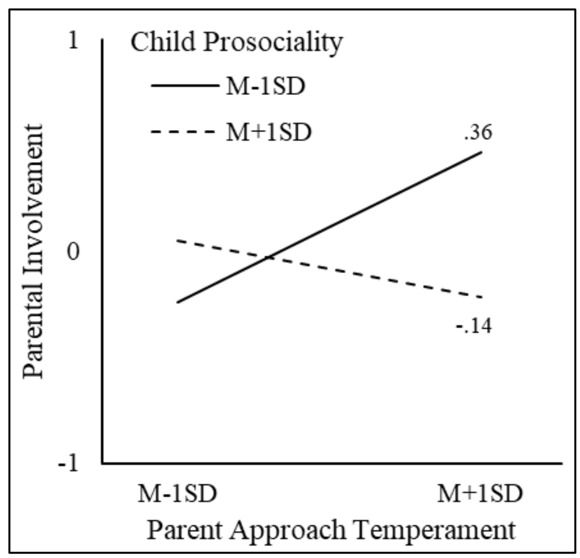


Figure 3. *Interaction Effect Between Parent Approach Temperament and Child Prosociality, Predicting Parental Structure*

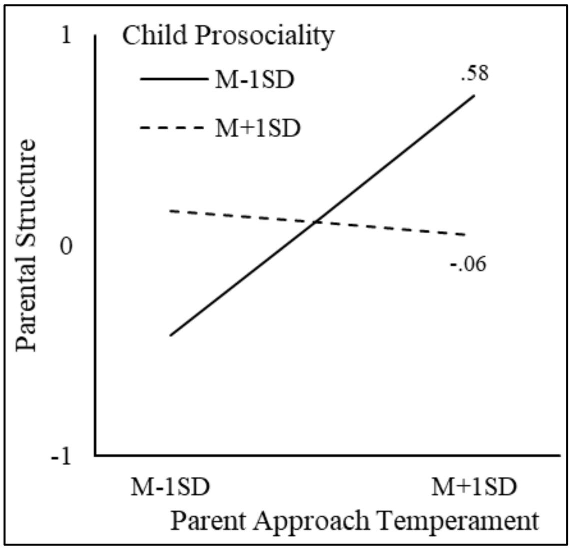
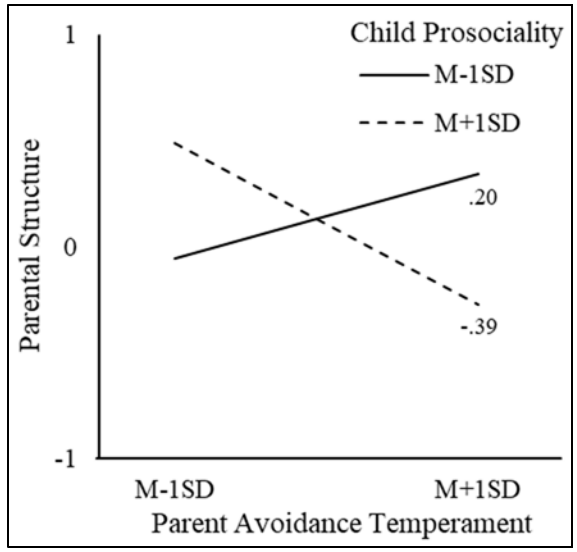


Figure 4. *Interaction Effect Between Parent Avoidance Temperament and Child Prosociality, Predicting Parental Structure*



Discussion

Parental temperament has been frequently associated with parenting behaviors in the literature. However, to the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to examine the prospective contributions of approach and avoidance temperamental dispositions to SDT-based parenting behaviors, while considering the moderating role of child behaviors. As expected, the overall picture of the results suggests that parents with an approach temperamental disposition were more inclined to engage in a range of positive parenting behaviors (i.e., autonomy support, involvement, and structure). In contrast, parents with an avoidance temperament appeared more prone to adopt controlling behaviors and practices. However, different patterns of associations were observed depending on the nature of the parenting behavior and the children's behavioral characteristics. The next section expands on these results and their implications for theory, research, and prevention.

Implications for the Parenting Literature

Children's optimal functioning depends in large part on the inclination of parents (along with other social agents) to engage in behaviors that adequately support them (Grolnick & Lerner, 2023). The findings of this study suggest that an approach temperament is one of the personality factors that may underlie autonomy-supportive behaviors. A person with an approach temperament is generally oriented toward desirable stimuli and prone to positive emotions (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). This temperament is also reflected in extraversion, a personality trait characterized by the phenotypic tendency to be enthusiastic, dynamic, and sociable (Elliot & Thrash, 2010). In the parenting literature, parental extraversion has been positively associated with self-competence (Bornstein et al., 2011), responsiveness (Koenig et al., 2010), and warmth (Prinzie et al., 2009). It is therefore reasonable to believe that a strong approach temperament comes with a set of attributes that predispose parents to be sensitive to their children's volitional nature and to be confident in supporting their self-regulation. This mindset could be manifested in parents' day-to-day interactions with their children by acknowledging their thoughts and emotions, providing rationales for expectations, offering meaningful choices, and giving age-appropriate opportunities for decision-making and responsibility. Notably, the relation between approach temperament and autonomy support was found to be independent of children's behavioral characteristics, suggesting that approach-oriented parents are inclined to engage in autonomy-supportive behaviors regardless of the children's levels of inattention or prosociality.

Another finding shows that parents with an approach temperament were more likely to engage with children who exhibited low levels of prosociality than were parents with an avoidance temperament. Compared to peers, these children have lower levels of empathy (Belacchi & Farina, 2012) and are less prompt to cooperate and help others (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2006). At the same time, they are at risk for concurrent behavioral problems (Duchesne et al., 2010) and academic impairments (Duchesne et al., 2005). Given the characteristics that underlie or co-occur with this temperament (e.g., positive emotionality, extraversion, self-competence), approach-oriented parents may perceive their children's vulnerabilities as challenges or needs rather than as problems or difficulties. This representation may in turn dispose them to respond positively, actively, and confidently to these vulnerabilities by increasing their involvement (e.g., devoting more time to their children, showing frequent interest, increasing instrumental and emotional support). This supposition is consistent with a study that showed that, for difficult, anger-prone children, fathers' openness predicted positive parenting (Koenig et al., 2010). Thus, having a strong approach temperament appears to be one of the prerequisites for parental involvement with children who have challenges or needs in terms of social behavior.

The results support our hypothesis that parental approach temperament would be positively associated with structuring behaviors. The explanations presented above for the positive characteristics of the approach temperament (e.g., positive emotionality and self-competence) could also apply here. In addition, structure was positively and moderately correlated with autonomy support and involvement, suggesting that parents tend to adopt these behaviors in concert. However, the moderating effects of child behavioral characteristics provided additional insights, in that approach-oriented parents were more likely to engage in structuring behaviors when their children exhibited high levels of inattention or low levels of prosociality. Because structure creates a predictable environment for children, including support and guidelines that facilitate self-regulation (e.g., Farkas & Grolnick, 2010; Ratelle & Duchesne, 2017), it is conceivable that these parents would attune their behaviors in response to their children's vulnerabilities and needs. In the case of children with attention problems, for example, approach-orientation could make parents more likely to provide reminders about academic expectations and help their children organize and plan actions in order to meet these expectations. With low prosocial children, they could be more likely to reiterate expectations for positive behaviors and provide informational feedback to guide such behaviors.

As hypothesized, our results indicate that parental avoidance temperament is positively related to control behaviors. This finding is in line with studies that have found that parents with the neuroticism personality trait (an indicator of avoidance temperament) were less autonomy-supportive with their children (Prinzie et al., 2009), and more coercive (Coplan et al., 2009). Avoidance temperament is characterized by sensitivity and emotional reactivity to negative stimuli (Elliot & Thrash, 2010). Parents with this basic temperamental disposition may tend to experience negative and unstable emotions when exposed to unpleasant or stressful parenting situations. Thus, when children do not meet expectations and standards for behavior and performance, parents may react with anger or anxiety. Moreover, given that emotional instability has been negatively associated with self-perceived parenting competence (Bornstein et al., 2011), avoidance-oriented parents could feel less competent to meet parenting demands, and hence strive to restore their emotional balance by engaging in rigid and controlling parenting behaviors with their child. To these parents, pressure or domination could be less demanding than autonomy-supportive behaviors.

Parents with an avoidance temperament were also more likely to engage in structuring behaviors with low prosocial compared to more prosocial children. At first glance this result appears puzzling, as these parents were prone to engaging in controlling parenting behaviors. The explanation may lie partly in how avoidant parents apply structure. In this regard, it has been posited that certain aspects of structure can be applied in either an autonomy-supportive or a controlling way (Farkas & Grolnick, 2010). For example, parents can provide a rationale for rules and expectations (autonomy support) or, conversely, they may impose these expectations without explanation (control). Therefore, it is possible that avoidant parents perceive the need to provide structure with a less empathetic, cooperative, and caring child. These behavioral characteristics may elicit negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, fear of feeling embarrassed), prompting parents to apply a more controlling form of structure (e.g., “because it is the rule”, “because I said so”). In contrast, avoidant parents with more socially oriented children would be less prone to negative affects and, therefore, less likely to feel the need to engage in structuring behaviors.

Finally, the results of this study show that children’s manifestations of inattention negatively predicted parents’ involvement, regardless of their temperamental disposition, with a moderate effect size and slightly overlapping CIs. This result echoes other studies that found that youths’ attention problems were associated transversely (e.g., Molina & Musich, 2016) and prospectively (Lifford et al., 2008) with negative parenting responses. Thus, it could be particularly challenging for parents to maintain a high level of daily involvement with children who are easily distracted, get lost in their thoughts, or struggle with tasks and activities.

Implications for Practice

Empirical studies on SDT have come to a clear and compelling conclusion about controlling parenting behaviors: they have harmful consequences on multiple facets of children's cognitive, emotional, social, and academic functioning (e.g., Ratelle & Duchesne, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The present study identified parent avoidance temperament as a personality factor that may promote these negative parenting behaviors. This temperament is characterized by a tendency to experience negative emotions in aversive situations (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). One of the core features of the avoidance temperament — neuroticism — has also been associated with low self-perceived parental competence (Bornstein et al., 2011). It would therefore be important to help avoidant parents self-regulate effectively and increase their sense of competence in parenting situations. Parenting education programs such as Triple P (Sanders, 2003) could meet these needs. This program aims to increase parenting competence through self-regulation skills. Previous studies have shown that both Triple P (de Graaf et al., 2008) and its online version (Day & Sanders, 2018) contribute to improve parenting behaviors and parental competence.

Another prevention strategy for parents could target SDT-based positive parenting behaviors (autonomy support, involvement, and structure). A family environment organized around these behaviors is associated with numerous benefits for children and adolescents, including the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs (e.g., autonomy, competence, and relatedness) as well as better social, emotional, and academic adjustment (see Ratelle & Duchesne, 2017). Programs designed to foster these behaviors have shown promising results. For example, the How-to Parenting Program (Faber & Mazlish, 2000) has proven beneficial in improving parenting style and promoting children's mental health (Joussemet et al., 2014). In addition, an online program for parents (Duchesne et al., 2025) showed improvements in autonomy-supportive behaviors as well as in children's competence-need satisfaction and motivation. Educators who deliver these programs, whether in person or online, could pay special attention to parents' approach and avoidance temperamental dispositions. For example, they could make parents aware of their dispositions and their potential implications for their parenting responses. These programs could also be tailored for children's specific behavioral vulnerabilities (e.g., provide adapted structuring behaviors for attention problems or poor social orientation).

Study Strengths and Limitations, and Recommendations for Future Research

The present study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that approach and avoidance temperamental dispositions in parents predicted SDT-based parenting behaviors over a 7-month period. It also provides further insights into the moderating role of certain behavioral characteristics of children.

Despite these strengths, it is important to acknowledge some limitations that should be addressed in future studies. First, the descriptive and correlational study design does not allow causal inferences. Although it is theoretically sound to postulate that parenting behaviors are determined by parents' personality, future studies should explore the cross-lagged longitudinal relations between these constructs. Second, the results should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size. In addition, the sample size limited the statistical analysis strategies that could be used. Future investigations with larger samples could consider latent factors to control for measurement error (Marsh et al., 2009). Third, because the data were collected from a single source (parents), the results are subject to common method bias. Future studies could assess parenting behaviors from the children's perspective as well. Fourth, this study focused on the moderating role of children's behavioral characteristics to examine relations between parents' temperamental dispositions and parenting behaviors. However, it is also possible that the relations between these constructs operate in other ways. For example, temperamental dispositions could predict children's behavioral characteristics via parenting behaviors. Studies with more substantial samples could test this more complex mediation model. Finally, research has shown that the achievement goals encouraged by parents were associated with autonomy-supportive and controlling behaviors (e.g., Mageau et al., 2016). In addition, links have been established between approach and avoidance temperaments and achievement goals (Elliot & Thrash, 2010). Future research could explore the mediating effects of these goals in the relation between temperaments and parenting behaviors.

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