

Committing Narcissism by Proxy

Parents who put children on display—are they narcissists?

by Mark Zaslav



Visit any family-oriented restaurant in an upscale neighborhood, and you will probably observe children obviously accustomed to being put on display by smiling, openly doting parents. These children speak loudly and have the attitude of royalty. The parents treat each youthful utterance or action as a profound offering from on high. No effort is made by the parent to restore a sense of modest restraint. As a clinical psychologist interested in the [negative effects of narcissistic parenting](#), this parental [exhibitionism](#) seizes my [attention](#). I wonder, “Are these parents narcissists?” and “What will be the outcome for the children?”

The first question seems easier to answer. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (*American [Psychiatric](#) Association, 2013*), up to 6.2% of the general population may meet the diagnostic criteria for [Narcissistic Personality Disorder](#). Even allowing that many people exhibit various [narcissistic](#) traits without meeting full diagnostic criteria, the sheer ubiquity of this style of modern [parenting](#) seems at odds with the notion that these (overly) proud parents share a psychological disorder. In short, this phenomenon is far too common for all of these parents to be narcissists, but they certainly appear to treat their children as if narcissistic personae by proxy.

True narcissists are especially sensitive and vulnerable to experiences capable of eliciting a sense of shameful deflation or inadequacy. In some respects, the entire [personality](#) structure develops as a means to keep [shame](#) at arm's length. The narcissist spends considerable time in grandiose [fantasy](#) states in which he or she imagines being admired, alternating with fleeting, rapid transitions to bitter, angry states in response to perceived unjust criticism or lack of acknowledgment. The narcissistic personality is thus hostage to the need for self-enhancement at the expense of the ability to care for or pay attention to others. In the case of truly narcissistic parents, self-absorption and lack of [empathy](#) deprive the child of needed attention and affection. Periodically (e.g., at graduations, family gatherings or public events), the child might briefly be put on display as an object for parental self-enhancement, but the narcissistic parent is unable to tolerate sustained diversion of attention to the child. For the narcissist, attention is a crucial commodity in a zero-sum game.

Of course, contrary to being neglected, the children that I observe are suffused with parental attention. If these (generally married, often from upper socioeconomic classes) parents are not clinically narcissists, this modern style of

permissive, exhibitionistic parenting can only be evidence of an emerging social phenomenon. At the larger cultural level, society is developing a new relationship with emotions in general and shame in particular. From the introduction of vague but dramatic figures of speech (“I’m like;” “that’s crazy”) to the currency of boastful but empty on-line posts, social media has hijacked our very ability to carefully analyze our experiences or communicate clearly about them. It is hard to overstate the degree to which continual on-line connection to sources of instant self-referential feedback, with the means to inspire [envious](#) attention from others, has warped the collective psyche. Emphasizing the underlining of subjective feeling states and downgrading objective analysis, social media is defining new norms about how we understand or announce our existence. More and more, it seems to be our immediate feelings that define us.

Against this backdrop of conspicuous sentimentality, unconditional love for the child has come to overwhelm any critical awareness of a child’s true impact on other people. It feels “shaming” to notice or focus on a child’s very normal but off-putting traits, such as [aggression](#), hostility, selfishness or entitlement. As traditional moral prohibitions are tossed aside in our enlightened ethos, our very culture has grown defiant of shame. Behaviors or attitudes formerly meeting with disapproval are now seen emerging from the oppressive shadow of arbitrary shunning into the sunlight of understanding. In addition to progress and tolerance, this movement can lead to chaos and confusion. The only remaining “authentic” guiding truth is commitment to heartfelt enthusiasms proudly proclaimed.

In this culture of online announcements and exhibitionistic displays of virtue, children become convenient, socially sanctioned receptacles for the [projection](#) of split-off, idealized aspects of the parental self. It is as if shame is an emotion from which children (and by extension, their

parents) must be protected. From this viewpoint, children embody [authenticity](#) unsullied by regressive societal forces. Even parents who would be loath to boast about themselves now risk becoming cheerleaders for their “perfect” children, unconsciously promoting a child’s display of cringeworthy hubris and entitlement. We seem to have lost the idea that responsible parenting requires reining in these qualities.

There is thus a growing moral prohibition against the necessary limit setting or authoritarian aspects of parenting, now seen as “harsh” or “mean.” The modern parent is increasingly restricted to use of only praise or indulgence for [fear](#) of alienating the child or injuring [self-esteem](#). This despite empirical research showing that high self-esteem is actually negatively correlated with success, mature compassion for others or optimal functioning in adulthood (*Bushman & Baumeister, 1998*).

We may already be seeing the effects of simultaneously permissive, over-identified, parents. In the past several years, college campuses have become home to “safe spaces,” the theme of which seems to be that students need protection, not only (appropriately) from physical threat, but also from exposure even to ideas or their proponents with which they disagree. Interestingly, while these students are reporting higher levels of self-esteem than in prior decades (*Twenge & Campbell, 2009*), we are simultaneously seeing what has been described as “mental health crisis” among our college students, who report increasing levels of [depression](#), [stress](#), and alienation (*Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018*). It seems that current parenting practices do not prepare young people to adapt to a real-world replete with disappointment and frustration. The modern parent may unwittingly be promoting vulnerability to [anxiety](#) and depression rather than resiliency in the face of adversity.

A parent need not be a narcissist to want the best for their child, to see and encourage the best within him or her, and to

defend against undue criticism. These biases are baked into human nature through evolution, biology and shared family histories. As the culture shifts, the challenge for a modern parent is to balance these natural instincts with proper limit setting, acting as an authority figure rather than a friend or approving peer. Children come into the world with what [Freud](#) termed “infantile narcissism,” a developmentally primitive understanding of the world as emanating from an expansive sense of the experiencing self as everything. Traditionally, parents helped socialize children by confronting and containing these traits. It remains to be seen what happens as our very culture begins to define children primarily as extensions of idealized parental virtue, perfect as they are, requiring no traditional forms of criticism or correction. I continue to wonder what types of parents these children will turn out to be.

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