

The role that parental discipline plays in developing narcissism in children and adolescents

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The Evolution of Parenting

Prior to the late 1960s, parenting was, in great part, based on the concept that because suffering exists, the role of parents was to teach their children how to cope with suffering. A prime example of this was the traditional practice of letting babies cry until they learned to calm themselves. During this period, parental mores also dictated that it was a child's task to follow the rules as well as demonstrate common courtesy towards others to ensure the well-being of all (Lewis, 2018).

Over the years since, attachment theory came to the fore, promoting the idea that responsive parenting, rather than spoiling the child as was thought, could reduce a child's distress, and improve their coping skills (Lewis, 2018). As a result, out went any remaining semblance of the old cliché, "a child must be seen and not heard" and in came unconditional love and encouragement. The use of punishment too was overhauled because punishment and love were considered incompatible, whereas systematic praise from parents and teachers was purported to raise children's confidence and increase their motivation levels (Lewis, 2018).

Narcissism and Causes in Children

However, more recently, researchers have consistently found that this form of responsive parenting lends itself to creating both shame and narcissism, where narcissism is considered a personality trait, rather than a disorder. The increased focus on the child, and the child, in turn, on himself, gives way to a desire for authentic self-expression (of their specialness) and self-righteous truth-telling, which, ultimately, takes precedence over courtesy towards others. This presumption of self-importance and entitlement are hallmarks of narcissism in that one values one's own "authenticity" and "specialness" over the well-being of others (Lewis, 2018).

It is important to note, however, that the overuse of positive parenting alone is not expected to fully account for the presence of narcissism. Rather, the absence of discipline also was expected to uniquely contribute (Soenens et al., as quoted in Eberly-Lewis, et al., 2018). Research on parenting demonstrates that “indulgent and acquiescent” parenting reinforces a belief that others are inferior whereas the self is superior and special, and therefore, entitled (Eberly-Lewis et al., 2018).

Additional research has also theorized the different ways that mothers and fathers may imbue narcissism. In a relatively recent study, mothers’ parenting styles and fathers’ styles predicted different forms of narcissism — and contributed in their own ways (Cramer, as cited in Lewis, 2018).

Types of Narcissism

As mentioned, there is a growing body of evidence that there are different forms of narcissism, which are considered either grandiose or vulnerable. While both are characterized by core beliefs of superiority and entitlement (and, paradoxically, poor self-esteem), each has distinct features (Cain et al., as cited in Derry & Bayliss, 2020).

In adults, grandiose narcissism is associated with extraversion and antisocial interpersonal behaviors including exploitation, lack of empathy, jealousy, aggression, and pretentiousness. (Imamoglu AH & Durak Batigun A., 2020).

In contrast, vulnerable narcissism is characterized by defensiveness, low self-esteem, aggression, hyper-sensitivity, and shyness (Derry & Bayliss, 2020).

The developmental age of significance

As cited by Ristic and Mitrovic in their 2020 study, Thomaes et al. (2008) point out that ages 7–12 are a key developmental phase during which the first evidence of narcissism emerges. From the age of eight to adolescence, children start to develop self-views in which both positive and negative attributes emerge as they start to base their views on social comparisons (Harter, as cited in Ristic and Mitrovic, 2020).

The importance of studying the causes of narcissism in childhood

As mentioned previously, the focus of this review is on narcissism as a personality trait, but, if narcissistic behaviors are not recognized and treated in time, these manifestations can become even more extreme in adulthood (Ristic and Mitrovic, 2020). When narcissism becomes pathological, it can lead to depression, low self-worth, suicide attempts, and poor relationships (van Schie et al., 2020).

There is also a collective recognition of the increase in narcissism over the last 30-plus years and a growing concern as to how that increase will play out now that Generation Y is in the workforce. This has prompted questions about how this generation developed such self-beliefs and raised the issue of how it can be addressed.

Measuring Narcissism in Children and Leniency in Parenting Styles

Scales to measure narcissism in children have evolved to consider the emerging evidence of the two types of narcissism, and not just measure the more studied grandiose narcissism. As such, the original Childhood Narcissism Scale (Thomaes, et al., as cited in Derry and Bayliss, 2020) was later updated to the Narcissism Scale for Children, which became the first scale developed to measure vulnerable narcissism in children (Derry and Bayliss, 2020). (Of note, however, is that not all current studies used this new scale, thus only observing grandiose

narcissism). Both scales comprise 10 items assessing the degree to which the child endorses narcissistic viewpoints, e.g. “I am a great example for other kids to follow” and employ a 5-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (completely true).

Adolescent children were also asked to appraise their mothers’ and fathers’ parenting styles using either the Perceived Parenting Attitudes in Childhood assessment or using the Strict/Lax Discipline subscale from the Children’s Report of Parenting Behavior Inventory. Both inventories made use of a Likert-type scale to measure one or more traits including parental praise, overprotection, warmth, engaged time, and discipline, and included questions such as, “Lets me off easy when I do something wrong”. (Schludermann & Schludermann, as cited in Eberly-Lewis et al., 2018).

The scales used all showed acceptable test-retest reliability, internal consistency, and construct validity.

Research findings to-date

Overall, the findings suggest that remembered maternal parenting has a stronger association with narcissism, potentially because the mother figure may often be the primary caregiver or carry out more of the parenting function (van Schie et al., 2020). It was also universally found that the combination of paternal leniency and overvaluation was associated with grandiose narcissism and that, when studied, remembered maternal leniency was associated only with vulnerable narcissism. It is theorized that the lack of limit-setting may have consequences for developing self-discipline which may be expressed as entitlement rage, which is relevant to vulnerable narcissism. (van Schie et al., 2020).

However, the interpretation of the current literature is complicated by a large number of mixed findings. For example, a lack of parental warmth has been associated with grandiose and vulnerable narcissism traits in some studies, but not in others. Most articles reviewed called for the need for further studies as the differences in findings could stem from cultural differences in expression, whether maternal and paternal parenting styles were distinguished, and whether childhood maltreatment was considered.

Gap in studies

Current research studies all relied upon retrospective self-reporting, which is subject to both memory recall and perceptual bias issues. It is also important to note that individuals with narcissistic traits tend to deny their weaknesses and de-emphasize stimuli that threaten their self-worth, so it might add to the challenge to get unbiased responses via self-reporting. One way to help ensure good test-retest correlation might be to also have the parent(s) rate their child, and the parent's partner (if one exists), rate the partner on their parental attributes. Even better would be to conduct a longitudinal study, where periodic check-ins could ensure good test-retest reliability to capture any changes in responses over the years.

Also, most studies considered "intact" families, and did not call out any potential changes in leniency that may have occurred due to divorce or the death of a parent. It is common to hear, colloquially, how parents try to become the favorite parent after a divorce and may slack on rules, and start to overpraise their child. This is where a longitudinal study with measurements of test-retest reliability could add value.

Most studies did not account for childhood trauma, so, it would be useful to include the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (van Schie et al., 2020) as part of this study.

As we can see from varying research results and the combination of parental attributes which appear to contribute, predicting narcissism is complex. As one author points out, perhaps a more nuanced measurement of narcissistic qualities would show different, multifaceted associations between mothers' and fathers' parenting. This could include more specificity regarding leniency, e.g., does a parent follow through on unobserved rules?

Only one study included the correlation of parenting styles in terms of gender impact. Of course, we also must consider that gender identity has proliferated as well, so initial studies should perhaps include a new category to account for individuals who do not identify as male or female.

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