



Mixed Blessings

Parental narcissism can set unattainable goals for children of affluent families.

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A COMMON, if unexamined, assumption in our culture is that the experience of privilege—the financial means to accomplish nearly any goal—is tantamount to the best life. Period. We all fantasize that wealth connects us with access to the best schools, the best real estate, the best support staff, vacation experiences and overall glamour—and hence, the most fun times, the best life. This is the gist of the American Dream. Upon closer inspection, however, this very commitment to the best of everything can undermine family relations.

How does this happen? What begins as well-intended standard-setting about family styles and rituals—“We all clean up a bit for dinner, we have meals with candles in the dining room every night and the staff takes care of the cleanup”—can become a prison for all but the standard-bearer. Quietly, over time, a whole pattern of family living conforms to the ideal image—or surface appearance—of what the good life looks like. In most cases, the standard-bearer is the parent. Children, eager to please and fearful of a parent’s wrath, learn to uphold nearly impossible standards in an effort to be

the “best child ever”: the high-value product of their parents’ investment.

PARENTAL NARCISSISM AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Narcissism is actually neither good nor bad; it is simply self-concern. Stemming from the well-known Greek myth of Narcissus, in which the youth is enchanted by his own reflection, narcissism is about self-image. Unhealthy narcissism in parents shows itself as an insatiable need to use their child as a positive reflection of themselves. Mothers who cannot let their preschoolers be seen in mismatched clothes or fathers who must have their 5-year-olds on a premier soccer team are emblematic of this pervasive tendency.

Parental narcissism can give rise to a vicious cycle of goals, standards and evaluative pressures. Take, for example, learning to play an instrument. The child achieves one set of the parent’s standards—playing the violin or singing a solo—and then the parent, eager to continue creating excellence and accessing the best, sets a whole new row of hurdles. In healthy families, this process of hurdle-setting is a normal part of growing up. Parents are always seeking to cultivate the

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child’s capacity to master appropriate developmental tasks. What distinguishes the narcissistic parent from the healthy parent is the emotional attachment to uniquely favorable outcomes, and therein lies the damage.

Over time, this cycle of striving linked to emotional satisfaction builds a toxic relationship. When the child enjoys a tentative triumph, a



narcissistic parent will move the bar higher, foreclosing on the child's right to celebrate. In lieu of celebrating small successes, the parent points to larger goals. Strong children, forced to comply with incessant hurdles, smolder with resentment toward parental attitudes that discount the children's ability to contribute to the family. More sensitive children simply collapse into discouragement and low self-esteem. In any case, the "true" child goes underground and instead constructs a "false" self: the product of the parent's desire.

THE WEALTH FACTOR

Why and how is this aggravated by the wealth experience?

1. **THE POWER OF ASSUMING** that one's children can be "the best" through investment in the best resources for them sets up disproportionate expectations of success, especially in cases in which the parent is the wealth creator. If social status is a concern of the parents, children may be viewed as little ambassadors for the parents. The child may or may not recognize that the chief purpose of his own existence is to make the parents look good.
2. **IN MANY CASES**, the parent grows spoiled, indulged by professionals and support staff. The normalization of high levels of service feeds a narcissistic attitude: I am wealthy, I deserve the best and I can afford it. The parent grows accustomed to being pleased and wielding the power to demand desired results—or else. The imbalance of power between parent and child is nearly infinite, and a young person's spirit can be broken or deeply harmed.
3. **MONEY MAY BE USED** as an overt or covert threat. In typical problematic cases, money and love are so entwined that monetary consequences are love equivalents: If I feel good, I love you and I buy you

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things. You get the money. If I don't feel good, I don't love you, you don't get things. By the time these threats start, the child is typically a teenager and understands that financial wealth is a powerful commodity in our society.

Thus, wealth characteristically amplifies the stakes in the entire familial picture: the height of expectations, the depth of the disappointment and the breadth of opportunity to acquire, or deny, resources.

LEARNING RESILIENCE

These constitute rather dark observations about family life. The obvious question is, what can be done about it? As it happens, real healing and change are possible.

For adult offspring of narcissists:

1. **SPOT THE PATTERN.** Are you unable to openly disagree with your parent? Do you feel entrapped by familial standards?
2. **DEVELOP SELF-PROTECTIVE** measures. Minimal coaching can enable adult children of narcissists to develop communication patterns that minimize their vulnerability.
3. **EXTEND EMPATHY** and understanding to the child (in you) who withdrew. Deeper recovery is possible through engagement with the authentic child and her gifts, bringing the experience through to current adult life.
4. **END THE CYCLE** by changing how you relate to family members. At any point, when an individual is ready, he or she can begin to relate

differently to family members. Narcissists' power lies in other's cooperation with their "front-row" agendas. Declining to cooperate changes the family.

5. **RECONCILE TO THE EXTENT** that it is possible. If the child of a narcissist engages in step four—refusal to cooperate with the unhealthy pattern—there may also be tension and anger. Over time, however, a more sincere relationship and some reconciliation are possible.

In most cases, it is the fear of the unknown—fear itself—that binds the family. Family relations are deadlocked when a narcissist holds all the power. Family members, who know only the one way of relating—by pleasing the narcissist—are less afraid of their known predicament than the void of the unknown field of alternatives.

An effective way to handle such a situation is to focus attention on creating a good life with the resources already in hand. If you realize that this is what you face, you will have a sense of loss as you distance yourself from this unhealthy family system. Yet it is the wisest choice. Be polite and continue the contact you can manage for the sake of your own dignity, but you will have to make a place for yourself in the world away from the parent and without that person's support. For most family members, the most difficult crossing lies in the deeply held wish that someday, in some way, the parent would change. Relinquishing that one expectation brings grieving—and freedom. **W**