

**10. Can praise contribute to narcissism in children?**

Eddie Brummelman

University of Amsterdam

Stathis Grapsas

Tilburg University

Please cite this manuscript as follows:

Brummelman, E., & Grapsas, S. (2020). Can praise contribute to narcissism in children? In E. Brummelman (Ed.), *Psychological perspectives on praise* (pp. 84–92). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Acknowledgments: n/a

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

### **Abstract**

Since the 1970s, Western parents have become increasingly concerned about raising children's self-esteem. Many parents believe that self-esteem contributes to children's success and happiness in life, and they are motivated to raise self-esteem by telling children how unique and extraordinary they are. However, there is some suggestive evidence that, since the very same decade, Western youth developed higher narcissism levels. The conclusion would seem too obvious: in lavishing children with praise, parents may inadvertently cultivate narcissism. This chapter reviews emerging research on when praise may (and may not) contribute to narcissism in children and suggests ways in which parents can effectively raise self-esteem without cultivating narcissism.

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

Since the 1970s, Western parents have become increasingly concerned about raising children's self-esteem (Miller & Cho, 2018). This is understandable given self-esteem's role in children's mental health, social relationships, and academic performance (Orth & Robins, 2014). A common belief is that children's self-esteem can be raised effectively through praise. Self-help books state that whenever a child feels bad, "find his good points and praise them and he will feel good about himself" (Collins, 2009, p. 3). The Center for Parenting Education (2019) notes that "one of the most common and effective ways to build children's self-esteem is to praise them." Self-esteem interventions often rely on praise as their core component (O'Mara, Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 2006). In addition, 87% of parents believe that children need praise to feel satisfied with themselves (Brummelman & Thomaes, 2011). An American mother said, "Praise is necessary. It is a must... You cannot build up a child's self-esteem without telling them continuously about the good things that they're doing..." (Miller & Cho, 2018, p. 64).

Did these well-intended parenting practices indeed raise children's self-esteem, or did they backfire? There is some suggestive evidence that, since the 1970s, Western youth developed higher narcissism levels (Grubbs & Riley, 2018; but see Wetzel et al., 2017, for evidence that this increase has leveled off). The conclusion would seem too obvious: in lavishing children with praise, parents may inadvertently contribute to the development of narcissism in children. This chapter reviews emerging research on when praise may (and may not) foster narcissism in children and suggests ways in which parents can effectively raise self-esteem without cultivating narcissism.

### **Narcissism**

Narcissism is an everyday personality trait characterized by feelings of superiority, a sense of entitlement, and craving for admiration (Foster & Campbell, 2007). Although

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

narcissism is often defined as excessive self-esteem, research shows that narcissism and self-esteem are distinct (Brummelman, Gürel, Thomaes, & Sedikides, 2018; Brummelman, Thomaes, & Sedikides, 2016; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2013). Narcissists feel superior to others but are not necessarily satisfied with themselves. When they do not get the admiration they crave, they feel like sinking through the ground and may lash out aggressively (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Over time, they are at risk of developing anxiety and depression (Barry & Malkin, 2010). By contrast, those with high self-esteem are satisfied with themselves but do not necessarily feel superior to others. They are unlikely to become angry or aggressive (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005) and are at reduced risk of anxiety and depression (Sowislo & Orth, 2013). In all, self-esteem reflects healthy feelings of worth, whereas narcissism reflects unhealthy feelings of superiority. Unsurprisingly, then, narcissism and self-esteem are usually correlated only weakly or modestly (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002).

Like self-esteem, narcissism emerges in middle-to-late childhood, around the age of 7, when children acquire two important cognitive capacities. First, they become able to form global self-evaluations. Younger children evaluate themselves, but those self-evaluations are often domain-specific (e.g., pertaining to their concrete, observable traits; Harter, 1990). Second, children become able to use social comparison in the service of self-evaluation. Younger children engage in social comparisons, but they often fail to use those comparisons to adjust their self-evaluations (Ruble & Frey, 1991). Thus, from the age of 7, children can make global self-evaluations that reflect superiority over others (e.g., “I’m a special person”), and their narcissism levels can be assessed reliably (Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003; Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, Olthof, & Denissen, 2008).

### **Parental Overvaluation**

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

Why do some children become narcissistic, whereas others do not? Like any other personality trait, narcissism is partly heritable (Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008) and rooted in early-emerging temperamental traits (Thomaes, Bushman, Orobio de Castro, & Stegge, 2009). At a preschool age, children who are at risk of later narcissism are more impulsive, emotionally unstable, and desiring to be at the center of attention (Carlson & Gjerde, 2009). Scholars have long assumed that, despite these in-born individual differences, narcissism is shaped substantially by socialization experiences. One socializing force that may contribute to narcissism is *parental overvaluation*. This concept was introduced in psychology by Sigmund Freud (1914/1957), who argued that some parents treat their child as “*His Majesty the Baby*” and “are under a compulsion to ascribe every perfection to the child—which sober observation would find no occasion to do—and to conceal and forget all his shortcomings” (p. 91). Decades later, Theodore Millon (1969) built on these observations to propose a social learning theory of narcissism development. According to this theory, children acquire narcissistic views of themselves when they are overvalued by their parents:

“For many and sundry reasons, some parents will view their child as ‘God’s gift to man.’ They pamper, indulge and fawn over the youngster in such ways as to teach him that his every wish is a command to others, that he can receive without giving and that he deserves prominence without effort. In short order, the child learns to view himself as a special being, learns to expect subservience from others, begins to recognize that his mere existence is sufficient to provide pleasure to others and that his every action evokes commendation and praise.” (p. 263)

At the time, there was no validated method to assess parental overvaluation. Recently, researchers developed and validated the seven-item Parental Overvaluation Scale (POS) to assess individual differences in parental overvaluation (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015). Parents rate how well overvaluing statements describe

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

the way they think about their child. Such statements include: “My child is more special than other children,” “My child deserves special treatment,” and “I would not be surprised to learn that my child has extraordinary talents and abilities” (0 = *Not at all true*, 3 = *Completely true*). In representative samples of Western parents, parental overvaluation was shown to have a single-factor structure and to be normally distributed, with the average parent scoring around the midpoint of the scale.

How does parental overvaluation guide parents’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors vis-à-vis their child? Overvaluing parents have been shown to overestimate, overclaim, and overpraise children’s qualities, while pressuring children to stand out from the crowd (for an overview, see Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015). Overvaluing parents believe their children are smarter than others, even when children’s actual IQ scores do not differ from those of others. Overvaluing parents claim their children have knowledge of a wide range of topics, even topics that do not exist (e.g., the nonexistent book *The Tale of Benson Bunny*). Overvaluing parents praise their children about 62% more often than do non-overvaluing parents, even when children do not actually excel at the task at hand. And overvaluing parents are more likely to give their children unique, uncommon first names, probably to make them stand out.

Do overvalued children develop higher narcissism levels, as social learning theory would predict? Researchers first addressed this question by tapping adults’ childhood recollections. In one study (Otway & Vignoles, 2006), for example, adults reported their current narcissism levels and how much they were overvalued as a child (e.g., “When I was a child my parents praised me for virtually everything I did”). Adults with higher narcissism levels reported more childhood experiences of parental overvaluation. To provide more direct evidence, researchers tracked the development of narcissism in childhood (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek et al., 2015). A large sample of children

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

aged 7-11 and their parents was followed prospectively over four six-monthly measurement waves. At each measurement wave, parents reported their parental overvaluation levels and children reported their narcissism and self-esteem levels. Consistent with social learning theory, parental overvaluation predicted higher narcissism levels in children over time. By contrast, it did not predict higher self-esteem levels over time. Recent cross-sectional evidence corroborates these findings (Derry, 2018). Thus, children develop narcissism levels, at least in part, by internalizing their parents' views of them (e.g., "I am superior to others" and "I deserve special treatment").

Despite their tendency to overpraise children, overvaluing parents may not approve of their children unconditionally. Overvaluing parents state, "I would find it disappointing if my child was just a 'regular' child" (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015). When the child fails to stand out, overvaluing parents may become disappointed or even hostile (cf. Assor & Tal, 2012; Wetzel & Robins, 2016): "the child is to be glorious and perfect, and the parents refuse to tolerate any hint of error, for then the child would be glorious and perfect no more" (Millon & Davis, 2000, p. 293). Consequently, narcissistic children may infer that they must be perfect, and they may feel rejected when perfection is not achieved (Tracy, Cheng, Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2009). This could explain why narcissistic children are prone to feeling ashamed when they fall short of external standards (Thomaes, Stegge, Olthof, Bushman, & Nezlek, 2011).

### **Inflated Praise**

Overvaluing parents engage in a variety of behaviors that may contribute to children's narcissism levels. One of these behaviors is inflated praise. Praise is inflated when it contains an adverb (e.g., *extremely*, *incredibly*) or adjective (e.g., *fantastic*, *amazing*) signaling an extremely positive evaluation (Brummelman, Thomaes, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, &

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

Bushman, 2014). Rather than praising children for doing well, parents may praise them for doing *incredibly* well. Rather than praising children for making a nice drawing, parents may praise them for making an *amazing* drawing. When children frequently receive inflated praise, they may gradually internalize the belief that they are superior individuals who deserve recognition, which may underlie narcissism. At the same time, children may become concerned about not being able to live up to this grandiose image, which may erode their self-esteem.

In an observational-longitudinal study (Brummelman, Nelemans, Thomaes, & Orobio de Castro, 2017), independent coders assessed how often parents gave their child inflated and noninflated praise. About 25% of all praise was inflated. At baseline, as well as 6, 12, and 18 months later, the child's narcissism and self-esteem levels were assessed. Parents gave more inflated praise to children with low self-esteem, probably in an attempt to raise their self-esteem. However, inflated praise did not predict higher self-esteem over time. Rather, it predicted lower self-esteem and higher narcissism in children over time. By contrast, noninflated praise predicted neither self-esteem nor narcissism in children. Thus, it was not praise per se—but rather its inflated nature—that predicted lower self-esteem and higher narcissism in children.

Importantly, inflated praise predicted higher narcissism over time, but only for children with preexisting high self-esteem levels. Why? When children receive praise, they compare it to their existing views of themselves. When it falls outside of their “latitudes of acceptance,” they may dismiss the praise as inaccurate (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). When children with low self-esteem receive inflated praise, they may dismiss it (e.g., “No, I’m not that incredible...”). But when children with high self-esteem receive inflated praise, they may embrace the praise (e.g., “Indeed, I am quite incredible”) and develop higher narcissism levels.

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

To be sure, these findings should not be taken to suggest that inflated praise is the only or the most important antecedent of narcissism. Rather, they illustrate how even well-intended messages, such as praise, can send unintended messages to children. Children are active meaning makers, and based on their interactions with significant others, they build mental representations of themselves in relation to others, which may come to underlie their personality development (Brummelman & Thomaes, 2017; Dweck, 2017). When their parents give them inflated praise, they may, over time, develop the superiority beliefs that underlie narcissism.

Once children have developed these narcissistic beliefs, they may come to expect inflated praise from others. What were once well-accepted forms of praise (e.g., “Nice,” “Good job”) may now be considered too modest. In a randomized experiment (Brummelman, Nikolić, & Bögels, 2018), after children’s narcissism levels were assessed, children were invited to sing a song on stage, and their performance was videotaped. When children had sung their song, the recording was brought to a professional singer (actually a confederate), who was waiting in another room. After a few minutes, the singer entered the room and gave children inflated praise (“You sang *incredibly* well!”), modest praise (“You sang well”), or no praise. Because narcissistic children may not admit feeling depreciated (Cascio, Konrath, & Falk, 2015), researchers assessed their physiological blushing—an involuntary reddening of the face that may occur when children are worried that others might form unfavorable impressions of them (Leary, Britt, Cutlip, & Templeton, 1992). Narcissistic children blushed when they received modest praise, but not when they received inflated praise. When they received the modest praise, they may have inferred that others do not see them as positively as they see themselves—a shameful experience.

### **Raising Self-Esteem Effectively**

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

Praise is a powerful tool in the hands of socialization agents. When praise is accurate and focused on children's actions, it can provide children with useful information about others' expectations of them, about their progress toward important goals, and about the utility of effort or strategies in learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). There is some evidence that, in these cases, praise can benefit children's self-esteem (O'Mara et al., 2006). Yet, in the long run, praise may not be the most effective means to raise self-esteem. When children are praised excessively, they may learn to evaluate themselves through the eyes of others, which provides a fragile basis for self-esteem development (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003). How can parents raise self-esteem effectively? Rather than trying to raise self-esteem directly through praise, parents may raise self-esteem indirectly by establishing warm relationships with their children (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek et al., 2015; Harris et al., 2017). Warm parents do not typically lavish children with praise, nor do they overestimate children's qualities (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015). Warm parents stand by their children; they spend time with them, share joy with them, and show interest in their experiences (MacDonald, 1992), while approving of their children unconditionally (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004). Over time, children of warm parents may internalize the belief that they are worthy individuals, neither better nor worse than others.

### **Conclusion**

Parents are motivated to raise children's self-esteem. However, there is emerging evidence that parents' well-intentioned attempts to raise self-esteem through praise may, in some cases, backfire and breed narcissism. An important challenge for future research will be to pinpoint how parents can raise self-esteem effectively, without breeding narcissism.

**References**

- Assor, A., Roth, G., & Deci, E. L. (2004). The emotional costs of parents' conditional regard: A self-determination theory analysis. *Journal of Personality, 72*, 47–88.
- Assor, A., & Tal, K. (2012). When parents' affection depends on child's achievement: Parental conditional positive regard, self-aggrandizement, shame and coping in adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence, 35*, 249–260.
- Barry, C. T., Frick, P. J., & Killian, A. L. (2003). The relation of narcissism and self-esteem to conduct problems in children: A preliminary investigation. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 32*, 139–152.
- Barry, C. T., & Malkin, M. L. (2010). The relation between adolescent narcissism and internalizing problems depends on the conceptualization of narcissism. *Journal of Research in Personality, 44*, 684–690.
- Brummelman, E., Gürel, C., Thomaes, S., & Sedikides, C. (2018). What separates narcissism from self-esteem? A social-cognitive perspective. In A. D. Hermann, A. B. Brunell, & J. D. Foster (Eds.), *The Handbook of trait narcissism: Key advances, research methods, and controversies* (pp. 47–55). New York, NY: Springer.
- Brummelman, E., Nelemans, S. A., Thomaes, S., & Orobio de Castro, B. (2017). When parents' praise inflates, children's self-esteem deflates. *Child Development, 88*, 1799–1809.
- Brummelman, E., Nikolić, M., & Bögels, S. M. (2018). What's in a blush? Physiological blushing reveals narcissistic children's social-evaluative concerns. *Psychophysiology, 55*, e13201.

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

Brummelman, E., & Thomaes, S. (2011). [Parents' beliefs about praise]. Unpublished raw data.

Brummelman, E., & Thomaes, S. (2017). How children construct views of themselves: A social-developmental perspective. *Child Development, 88*, 1763–1773.

Brummelman, E., Thomaes, S., Nelemans, S. A., Orobio de Castro, B., & Bushman, B. J. (2015). My child is God's gift to humanity: Development and validation of the Parental Overvaluation Scale (POS). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 108*, 665–679.

Brummelman, E., Thomaes, S., Nelemans, S. A., Orobio de Castro, B., Overbeek, G., & Bushman, B. J. (2015). Origins of narcissism in children. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA, 112*, 3659–3662.

Brummelman, E., Thomaes, S., Orobio de Castro, B., Overbeek, G., & Bushman, B. J. (2014). "That's not just beautiful—that's incredibly beautiful!": The adverse impact of inflated praise on children with low self-esteem. *Psychological Science, 25*, 728–735.

Brummelman, E., Thomaes, S., & Sedikides, C. (2016). Separating narcissism from self-esteem. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 25*, 8–13.

Bushman, B. J., & Baumeister, R. F. (1998). Threatened egotism, narcissism, self-esteem, and direct and displaced aggression: Does self-love or self-hate lead to violence? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 75*, 219–229.

Campbell, W. K., Rudich, E. A., & Sedikides, C. (2002). Narcissism, self-esteem, and the positivity of self-views: Two portraits of self-love. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 28*, 358–368.

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

- Carlson, K. S., & Gjerde, P. F. (2009). Preschool personality antecedents of narcissism in adolescence and young adulthood: A 20-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Research in Personality, 43*, 570–578.
- Cascio, C. N., Konrath, S. H., & Falk, E. B. (2015). Narcissists' social pain seen only in the brain. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience, 10*, 335–341.
- Collins, M. (2009). *Raising self-esteem in primary schools: A whole school training programme*. London, England: Sage.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1995). Human autonomy: The basis for true self-esteem. In M. Kernis (Ed.), *Efficacy, agency, and self-esteem* (pp. 31–49). Springer, Boston, MA.
- Derry, K. L. (2018). *An examination of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism in adults, adolescents, and children* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Western Australia, Australia.
- Donnellan, M. B., Trzesniewski, K. H., Robins, R. W., Moffitt, T. E., & Caspi, A. (2005). Low self-esteem is related to aggression, antisocial behavior, and delinquency. *Psychological Science, 16*, 328–335.
- Dweck, C. S. (2017). From needs to goals and representations: Foundations for a unified theory of motivation, personality, and development. *Psychological Review, 124*, 689–719.
- Foster, J. D., & Campbell, W. K. (2007). Are there such things as “narcissists” in social psychology? A taxometric analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. *Personality and Individual Differences, 43*, 1321–1332.

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

- Freud, S. (1957). On narcissism: An introduction. In J. Strachey (Ed.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 14, pp. 68–102). London, England: Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1914)
- Grubbs, J. B., & Riley, A. C. (2018). Generational differences in narcissism and narcissistic traits. In A. D. Hermann, A. B. Brunell, & J. D. Foster (Eds.), *The handbook of trait narcissism: Key advances, research methods, and controversies* (pp. 183–191). New York, NY: Springer.
- Harris, M. A., Donnellan, M. B., Guo, J., McAdams, D. P., Garnier-Villarreal, M., & Trzesniewski, K. H. (2017). Parental co-construction of 5- to 13-year-olds' global self-esteem through reminiscing about past events. *Child Development, 88*, 1810–1822.
- Harter, S. (1990). Causes, correlates, and the functional role of global self-worth: A life-span perspective. In R. J. Sternberg & J. Kolligian Jr. (Eds.), *Competence considered* (pp. 67–97). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research, 77*, 81–112.
- Kernis, M. H. (2003). Toward a conceptualization of optimal self-esteem. *Psychological Inquiry, 14*, 1–26.
- Leary, M. R., Britt, T. W., Cutlip, W. D., & Templeton, J. L. (1992). Social blushing. *Psychological Bulletin, 112*, 446–460.
- MacDonald, K. (1992). Warmth as a developmental construct: an evolutionary analysis. *Child Development, 63*, 753–773.

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

- Miller, P. J., & Cho, G. E. (2018). *Self-esteem in time and place: How American families imagine, enact, and personalize a cultural ideal*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Millon, T. (1969). *Modern psychopathology: A biosocial approach to maladaptive learning and functioning*. Philadelphia, PA: Saunders.
- Millon, T., & Davis, R. D. (2000). *Personality disorders in modern life*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- O'Mara, A. J., Marsh, H. W., Craven, R. G., & Debus, R. L. (2006). Do self-concept interventions make a difference? A synergistic blend of construct validation and meta-analysis. *Educational Psychologist, 41*, 181–206.
- Orth, U., & Robins, R. W. (2014). The development of self-esteem. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 23*, 381–387.
- Otway, L. J., & Vignoles, V. L. (2006). Narcissism and childhood recollections: A quantitative test of psychoanalytic predictions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 32*, 104–116.
- Ruble, D. N., & Frey, K. S. (1991). Changing patterns of comparative behavior as skills are acquired: A functional model of self-evaluation. In J. Suls & T. A. Wills (Eds.), *Social comparison: Contemporary theory and research* (pp. 79–113). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Sherif, M., & Hovland, C. I. (1961). *Social judgment: Assimilation and contrast effects in communication and attitude change*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sowislo, J. F., & Orth, U. (2013). Does low self-esteem predict depression and anxiety? A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Psychological Bulletin, 139*, 213–240.

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

The Center for Parenting Education. (2019). The Center for Parenting Education: A resource to help parents do the best job they can to raise their children. Retrieved from

<https://centerforparentingeducation.org/library-of-articles/self-esteem/what-parents-need-to-know-about-self-esteem/>

Thomaes, S., Bushman, B. J., Castro, B. O. de, & Stegge, H. (2009). What makes narcissists bloom? A framework for research on the etiology and development of narcissism.

*Development and Psychopathology, 21*, 1233–1247.

Thomaes, S., Stegge, H., Bushman, B. J., Olthof, T., & Denissen, J. (2008). Development and validation of the Childhood Narcissism Scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 90*, 382–391.

Thomaes, S., Stegge, H., Olthof, T., Bushman, B. J., & Nezlek, J. B. (2011). Turning shame inside-out: “Humiliated fury” in young adolescents. *Emotion, 11*, 786–793.

Tracy, J. L., Cheng, J. T., Robins, R. W., & Trzesniewski, K. H. (2009). Authentic and hubristic pride: The affective core of self-esteem and narcissism. *Self and Identity, 8*, 196–213.

Trzesniewski, K. H., Donnellan, M. B., & Robins, R. W. (2013). Development of self-esteem. In V. Zeigler-Hill (Ed.), *Self-esteem* (pp. 60–79). New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Vernon, P. A., Villani, V. C., Vickers, L. C., & Harris, J. A. (2008). A behavioral genetic investigation of the Dark Triad and the Big 5. *Personality and Individual Differences, 44*, 445–452.

## PRAISE AND NARCISSISM

Wetzel, E., Brown, A., Hill, P. L., Chung, J. M., Robins, R. W., & Roberts, B. W. (2017).

The narcissism epidemic is dead; long live the narcissism epidemic. *Psychological Science*, *28*, 1833–1847.

Wetzel, E., & Robins, R. W. (2016). Are parenting practices associated with the development of narcissism? Findings from a longitudinal study of Mexican-origin youth. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *63*, 84–94.