

Parents, your inflated praise could be turning your child into a narcissist

Dave McGinn

The Globe and Mail

Published Tuesday, Mar. 10 2015, 2:21 PM EDT

Heaping praise on kids is a natural tendency for many parents. A child brings home straight As, so you tell her, “You’re so smart!” Or your son shows you one of his drawings and you say, “That’s amazing! You’re such a great artist!”

But inflated praise may very well be turning children into narcissists, according to a new study published Monday in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

Researchers followed 565 children ages seven to 12 and their parents over the course of a year and a half. Every six months, the kids and their parents were tested for narcissistic tendencies.

For example, parents were asked to respond to questions such as “I would not be surprised to learn that my child has extraordinary talents and abilities.” Children were asked how they felt about statements such as “Kids like me deserve something extra,” or “Some kids like the kind of person they are.”

The latter statement measures self-esteem, while the former measures narcissism.

While narcissists usually have high self-esteem, people with high self-esteem aren’t necessarily narcissists.

“Self-esteem basically means you’re a person of worth equal with other people. Narcissism means you think you’re better than other people,” lead author Brad Bushman, a communications and psychology professor at Ohio State University, [told NPR](#).

We shouldn’t be surprised when kids who are told over and over again that they are better than other people actually start to believe it.

This study seems to conclude exactly that: Nothing predicted a kid’s narcissism over the course of the study more than parental over-evaluation.

And there is even more bad news for parents who think praise will boost a kid's self-esteem – there's no evidence it does, at least not in this study.

Telling children they're the greatest may create entitled little brats, but it also likely has even more toxic effects.

"Narcissistic children feel superior to others, believe they are entitled to privileges, and crave for constant admiration from others," co-author [Eddie Brummelman told Forbes](#). "When they fail to obtain the admiration they want, they may lash out aggressively. Narcissistic individuals are also at increased risk to develop addiction. Subgroups of narcissists, especially those with low self-esteem, are at increased risk to develop anxiety and depression."

Of course, showing signs of narcissism as a kid doesn't mean you're going to grow up to be Christian Bale in *American Psycho*, as the researchers point out.

And given our current cultural obsession with narcissism and its causes on one hand, and entitled kids who need to learn some grit on the other, it's fair to be a little skeptical of this study.

But a lot of [other research on praise](#) has come to the same broad conclusion: Praise a child's effort – "You worked really hard on that, I'm proud of you!" – and she's likely to apply herself again in the future, nose to the proverbial grindstone. But praise a child's intelligence or some other ability they believe is "fixed" and they are more likely to quit when the going gets tough.

"Kids believe everything that we say, until they're teenagers," says Julie Freedman Smith, a Calgary-based parenting coach. "If we tell them that they are perfect and can do no wrong, they think that's who they're supposed to be."

Many parents today are likely to give superlative praise because that's how they grew up, Freedman Smith says.

"Most of us who are now parents were raised being told, 'You can do anything! You're the best!'" she says.

Eventually, though, most kids realize they're not the best or the smartest or the greatest, which is why praise can create narcissistic tendencies but not raise self-esteem.

"We need to talk to our kids about the fact that they have strengths and weaknesses, and we see them for that, and we love them for that," Freedman Smith says. "It's so easy, but it's so not what we were taught."