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Too much praise may make kids narcissistic

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Do people become narcissists because their parents are too mean to them or too nice? These opposing theories both have proponents, but it is the latter that gets support from the first long-term study of narcissistic traits in children.

Freudian psychoanalysts were the first to propose that children with cold and unloving parents compensate by loving and praising themselves excessively. But more recently, others have claimed that narcissism arises from the opposite problem – of parents praising their children too much, giving them an inflated sense of their own worth.



Is too much praise bad for children? (Image: [Rebecca Nelson/Getty](#))

This might seem more intuitive, but the cold-parents theory is still alive and well among some psychoanalysts. To test this idea, [Eddie Brummelman](#) at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands and his colleagues studied 565 children between the ages of 7 to 12, a period that often sees the emergence of narcissistic traits such as selfishness, self-centredness and vanity. "Previous studies were all conducted in adults," says Brummelman. "We wanted to see how [narcissism] develops over time."

Over 18 months, the children and their parents were given several detailed questionnaires that were designed to measure narcissistic traits and parental behaviour. Children, for example, had to give a rating of the extent to which they agreed with statements such as "my mother lets me know she loves me" and "kids like me deserve something extra". Although parental warmth had no effect on the children's narcissism, there was a small but significant link at each stage between how much parents praised their children and how narcissistic the children were six months later.

Because the effect was only small, it suggests that other things also make people selfish and self-centred, perhaps genetics, says Brummelman. But the fact there was any correlation at all does seem to pour cold water on the cold-parents theory, he says.

Cliché rings true

Complaints about various shortcomings of "the youth of today" are heard in every generation, yet when it comes to narcissism, the cliché may for once be true.

People really do seem to have [become more narcissistic since the 1980s](#) according to a meta-analysis of students in US colleges.

In a previous study, Brummelman's team developed a scale to measure how much people overvalue their offspring by giving children maths tests and seeing [how much their parents praised them afterwards](#). "The overvaluers praise no matter how well their children do, and they overestimate their [children's] IQ too," he says.

However, [Peter Fonagy](#), a psychoanalyst at University College London, says that cold parenting is an oversimplification of the psychoanalytical position. He thinks narcissism in children would have a stronger correlation with parents undervaluing their children or failing to give praise when it is due – something the latest study did not measure.