



# Are we raising a nation of little egomaniacs?

Debate erupts over whether kids get too much praise or not enough

By Victoria Clayton

MSNBC contributor

Updated: 6:32 a.m. PT April 2, 2007

Stephen Scheck never liked the way some parents lavish praise on their kids in public, so he didn't do it with his two children, now freshmen in high school and college.

"My wife and I pretty early on started to notice this whole thing happening at Brownies, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, 4-H meetings or wherever that many parents seemed very invested in their children always being the star, always having a great time, always feeling successful," says Scheck, a college dean in Monmouth, Ore.

Yet he wanted the children to have high self-esteem, so the youngsters got their share of ego boosts at home. They also were steered toward sports such as swimming where they had a chance to not only compete with other kids but also achieve "personal bests." Both children were urged to play musical instruments, which gave them a sense of accomplishment. He wanted them to feel good and successful, and he certainly told them they were capable and special.

But even though Scheck wasn't screaming from the stands, his parenting style might still come under fire from some psychologists who believe we're raising a nation of "special" egomaniacs. This notion was fueled recently by Jean Twenge, a San Diego State University psychologist, and colleagues who released the results of a study that concluded college kids today are 30 percent more narcissistic than they were in 1982.

Many psychologists and other child-health specialists, though, aren't buying the assertion that some coddling turns kids into little monsters.

## You're not so special

Twenge primarily attributes the increase in narcissism to the obsession of parents and educators, beginning in the early 1990s, with self-esteem, praise and making sure children feel good. Although Twenge's research has not yet been published in a peer-reviewed journal, she discusses her study of 16,475 college kids in her book "Generation Me."

"In the American Academy of Pediatrics guide to caring for your young child, self-esteem is mentioned seven times in 10 pages," says Twenge. "From the beginning, there is so much focus on children feeling good about themselves now that other things appear to be falling by the wayside."

### POSITIVE PARENTING

While experts debate just how much praise is appropriate to lavish on children, there are some parenting points they all agree on:

- Give accurate feedback. Nobody can master a skill or even get better if they don't have genuine feedback. Of course, be kind. But also be truthful.
- Don't overpraise. Kids can't be great at absolutely everything. If you tell them they are, they'll soon find out the truth and not trust you. Be encouraging but don't overdo it.
- Promote new activities. The more kids try, the better the odds they'll find something they're great at. Also, the experience of not being good at something is valuable.
- Let them suffer consequences. Kids who aren't allowed to take responsibility for their actions don't develop responsible characters, a linchpin of solid self-esteem. So if they don't study for a test or do the homework, don't call the teacher for special treatment.

One of her recommendations is for parents and educators to ditch the self-esteem movement and aphorisms such as "you can be anything you want to be" or "you have to love yourself first," which she says have become ubiquitous in child-rearing and have contributed to today's onslaught of unreal, narcissistic kids. Her study asserts that narcissists are more likely to have short-lived romantic relationships, lack emotional warmth and be dishonest, overcontrolling and violent. Moreover, a narcissistic child is more likely to become an angry failure of an adult, says Twenge. When you're raised to think you're great at everything, it can be a devastating blow when success turns elusive.

But Dr. Joshua D. Sparrow, assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School in Boston, is skeptical of Twenge's conclusions.

Sparrow says one of the big problems is that Twenge makes a claim that kids are more narcissistic these days but she doesn't account for the possibility that our culture as a whole may be more self-centered than it was 20 years ago. "Look at all the people driving gas-guzzling SUVs. They are not all 35 and under," he says.

Furthermore, asserting a causal link between focusing on a child's self-esteem and producing narcissistic young adults is specious, says Sparrow, who is also co-author of "Touchpoints: Three to Six."

## Self-esteem a bad word?

"I don't think false praise or overpraising a child is helpful," Sparrow says, "but if you're using the correct definition for self-esteem, which doesn't include boosting a child's ego by overpraising or praising falsely, I don't see how it can be viewed negatively."

The National Association for Self-Esteem defines self-esteem simply as the experience of being capable of meeting life's challenges and being worthy of happiness.

Jacquelyne Joens, a Des Moines, Iowa, mental health counselor and mother of two, agrees with Sparrow that the concept often is misunderstood.

"Self-esteem anymore has negative connotations because it hasn't been treated right," she says. "It is not about positive affirmations and undeserved praise. Self-esteem is merely knowing, understanding and feeling good about who you are. And that's something you can't have too much of."

While Joens' sons, who are now 18 and 21, were growing up she acknowledges that she sometimes felt educators and parents mishandled situations in the name of self-esteem.

"A teacher once informed me that she didn't want to push kids too far because if they had trouble with the work they wouldn't feel good about themselves," explains Joens. Her sons also went to schools that did away with reading and math levels for fear that ranking children would make those in the lesser accomplished groups "feel bad."

She acknowledges that these types of actions can come off as ridiculous and may even give children a false feeling of success. However, she does not buy into the notion that self-esteem produces narcissistic kids.

"We have a pretty mentally unhealthy society right now," she says. "It's not because we focused on self-esteem too much. In fact, I think we should pay more attention to it ... we need to do it right. We need to give kids accurate feedback, teach them to know themselves, their families and what they think and feel about different issues. You don't tell a child who is a C student in math that he is a wonderful mathematician. He knows doggoned well that the kid sitting next to him — the A student — if far better."

Instead, she says, you tell him that with work he may be able to bring his grade up or master more of the needed skills.

Scheck agrees, noting that his kids were usually pretty good at knowing what was real and what wasn't. Throughout their childhood both of his kids were showered with feel-good ribbons and awards for merely participating in sports, music and science events. Whatever they did, they seemed to come home with a certificate or a ribbon.

But have his kids grown into self-important egomaniacs because of the praise and ribbons?

Maybe sometimes. Scheck recalls his son coming home from volunteering in the emergency room and complaining that the doctors and nurses didn't include him in any of their discussions about patients. His son was in high school at the time.

"Times like these have made it clear that our kids have much higher opinions of themselves than my wife and I ever did at their age," he says. After the Schecks stopped laughing, however, they used it as a teachable moment. "We talked to him not only about patient confidentiality but also about how he has to earn the respect of people he admires. It's not just automatic," says Scheck. "He got it. And you know what? Eventually the doctors did include him in some of their discussions."

## An 'A' for effort

According to Charlotte Reznick, former UCLA Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology, this is a good example of a kid with decent self-esteem going after what he wanted.

"If you don't think you can, you won't even try," says Reznick. The best thing about self-esteem is that it gives kids courage to explore and learn. So if Scheck's son never thought he was worthy of contributing to an ER department or, as he's currently doing, studying science at a well-respected university, he never would have gone for these goals.

"I don't want parents to think they should stop telling kids they're important. They need that. This is simply a great time to reevaluate what self-esteem means. Kids need self-esteem so they have enough courage to explore the areas that interest them," Reznick says.

Scheck, dean of liberal arts and sciences at Western Oregon University, believes the current generation may feel more entitled than their elders but he doesn't feel society is damned because of it.

"I started teaching college 25 years ago and today I run into just as many fantastic kids — and just as many obnoxious ones — as I did when I started."

*Victoria Clayton is a freelance writer based in California and co-author of "Fearless Pregnancy: Wisdom and Reassurance from a Doctor, a Midwife and a Mom," published by Fair Winds Press.*