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Spoiled Rotten -- A Timeless Complaint

By Alfie Kohn

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If the subject is kids and how they're raised, it seems our culture has exactly one story to tell. Anyone who reads newspapers, magazines, or blogs -- or attends dinner parties -- will already know it by heart: Parents today, we're informed, either can't or won't set limits for their children. Instead of disciplining them, they coddle and dote and bend over backward to shield them from frustration and protect their self-esteem. The result is that we're raising a generation of undisciplined narcissists who expect everything to go their way, and it won't be pretty -- for them or for our society -- when their sense of entitlement finally crashes into the unforgiving real world.

Read ten articles or books on this topic and you'll find yourself wondering if a single person wrote all of them, so uniform is the rhetoric. The central premise is that the problem's dimensions are unprecedented: What's happening now contrasts sharply with the days when parents weren't afraid to hold kids to high standards or to allow them to experience failure.

That's why no generation of teens and young adults has ever been as self-centered as this one. Take it from journalist Peter Wyden, the cover of whose book on the subject depicts a child lounging on a divan eating grapes while Mom fans him and Dad holds an umbrella to protect him from the sun: It's become "tougher and tougher to say 'no' [to children] and make it stick," he insists.

Or listen to the lament of a parent who blames progressive child development experts for the fact that her kids now seem to believe "they have priority over everything and everybody."

Or consider a pointed polemic published in *The Atlantic*. Sure, the author concedes, kids have always been pleasure seekers, but longtime teachers report that what we're currently witnessing "is different from anything we have ever seen in the young before." Parents teach "nothing wholeheartedly" and things come so easily to children nowadays that they fail to develop any self-discipline. Forget about traditional values: Today, it's just a "*culte du moi*."

Powerful stuff. Except now that I think about it, those three indictments may not offer the best argument against today's parents and their offspring. That's because they were published in 1962, 1944, and 1911, respectively.

The revelation that people were saying almost exactly the same things a century ago ought to make us stop talking in mid-sentence and sit down – hard. In fact, the more carefully we look at the cranky-wistful conventional wisdom about how children are raised, the less there is to be said in its favor.

Specifically, let's consider three questions: Are parents unduly yielding (or overprotective)? Are kids today more narcissistic than earlier generations were? And does the former cause the latter?

BAD PARENTS?

Everyone has an anecdote about a parent who hovered too close or tolerated too much. But is it representative of American parents in general? Has any researcher, for example, calculated how many parents could be classified as “permissive” -- assuming we can agree on how to define that word?

No. My own efforts to track down national data – by combing both scholarly and popular databases as well as asking leading experts in the field – have yielded absolutely nothing. Scholars have no idea how many parents these days are permissive, or punitive, or responsive to their children's needs without being permissive *or* punitive. (The tendency to overlook that third possibility is a troubling and enduring trend in its own right.)

Not surprisingly, then, no one has a clue as to whether parenting has changed over the years – and, if so, in what direction. Researchers have shown that various practices are more likely to produce certain outcomes, but they shrug when asked how prevalent those practices are. And just as with permissiveness, “you will find next to no scientific data on helicopter parenting,” says Keene State College psychologist Neil Montgomery, using the colloquial term for overinvolvement in one's child's life. The scores of articles and books about this phenomenon rely on carefully selected anecdotes to give the appearance of a trend.

What we *do* know about discipline is that corporal punishment remains extremely popular in this country. In a 1995 poll, 94 percent of parents of preschoolers admitted to having struck their children within the last year, a fact that's not easy to square with claims that parents have become softer or more humane. (Of course, even if spanking had become rarer, that wouldn't prove that parents were permissive or even necessarily less punitive.)

It's also interesting that the great majority of contemporary parenting books, seminars, and syndicated columns are focused not on meeting kids' needs but on making them do whatever they're told. Some of the recommended *methods* have shifted over the years, but the *goal* is still compliance.

One of those recommendations is to praise children when they please us or impress us. “Good job!” is typically employed in the service of getting kids to obey; it’s a verbal reward -- the mirror image of punishment. When you think about it, the same is true of much so-called “overparenting”: it’s an exercise in control, not indulgence. Yet praise and hovering are commonly interpreted as signs of excessive encouragement.

Critics also tend to lump together a bunch of alleged problems that are actually quite distinct: kids are said to be overscheduled, they’re pushed too hard to achieve, they get A’s too easily, they’re micromanaged by their parents, they’re shielded from failure, they’re not disciplined sufficiently, and so on. This conceptual sloppiness helps writers to get away with broad, unsubstantiated claims. And the goal is usually to move parenting in the direction of being even more traditional and controlling than it already is.

SELF-CENTERED CHILDREN?

When the conversation turns to what the kids themselves are like, we notice a similar goulash of complaints: they’re rude, lacking in moral standards, materialistic, defiant, self-centered, excessively pleased with themselves, and more. Again, these characteristics are very different from one another, and the existence of each would need to be demonstrated.

What *are* interchangeable, in style and substance, are the polemics themselves -- recent books with titles like *Overindulged Children*, *Spoiling Childhood*, *The Myth of Self-Esteem*, *The Epidemic*, *Pampered Child Syndrome*, *The Omnipotent Child*, *Generation Me*, *The Narcissism Epidemic*, and countless articles in the popular press. Trust me: If you’ve read one of these, you’ve read them all.

Like the “permissive parents” trope, the notion that kids are full of themselves and out of control is decades, if not centuries, old -- despite the critics’ assertion that things are worse than ever. Jean Twenge, who wrote the last two books on that list, establishes her conservative bona fides with sweeping attacks on anything that deviates from back-to-basics education and old-fashioned parenting. But unlike her ideological counterparts, she has actually collected some data -- which have received widespread and largely uncritical media attention.

Along with fellow psychologist W. Keith Campbell, Twenge has looked at various surveys of young people conducted over several decades and reported that later groups say they like themselves somewhat more, are more confident about themselves, or score higher on questionnaires intended to measure narcissism than did earlier groups.

But other researchers have questioned these findings, raising multiple concerns about Twenge's methodology: whether it makes sense to combine everyone from elementary school students to 30-somethings into a single “generation,” as she does at one point, whether the groups of young people sampled then and now are truly comparable, and whether those questionnaires are valid. Two separate groups of researchers then conducted their own analyses -- in one case drawing from additional data -- and discovered no meaningful differences across generations.

The interesting question is why many of us are so willing to *believe* that kids today are excessively self-confident or self-centered. Social psychologists have described how we selectively notice and remember examples that confirm our assumptions -- which is why “proof by anecdote” is so unreliable: Look, there’s a parent who’s wimpy. And my cousin knows a 20-year-old who refuses to work hard. I *knew* it was true!

But why would we gravitate to these beliefs in the first place? In an article published earlier this year in the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Brent Roberts, Grant Edmonds, and Emily Grijalva, researchers at the University of Illinois, explained that “Generation Me” -- Twenge’s catchy, snide label -- actually reflects people's age, not the age they live in. "Every generation of young people is substantially more narcissistic than their elders, not because of cultural changes, but because of age-related developmental trends."

To that extent, they continue, “when older people are told that younger people are getting increasingly narcissistic, they may be prone to agree because they confuse the claim for generational change with the fact that younger people are simply more narcissistic than they are. The confusion leads to an increased likelihood that older individuals will agree with the Generation Me argument despite its lack of empirical support.”

In short, “every generation is Generation Me. That is, until they grow up.”

ONLY CONNECT...

There’s no evidence, then, that today’s parents are too permissive, or are more permissive than parents of yesteryear. And with the failure to corroborate Twenge’s claims, there’s no evidence that today’s young people are more narcissistic. But even if both were true, critics would have to show that the second phenomenon results from the first. No one has come close to doing so.

In fact, three recent, and disparate, studies cast serious doubt on that proposition. The first, published in *Pediatrics* last May, discovered that there is indeed a parental practice associated with children who later become demanding and easily frustrated. But it’s not groovy, indulgent parenting. It’s *spanking*.

The second study, by a pair of sociologists, addresses the claim that students with unrealistic expectations -- in this case, about going to college -- will implode when they’re unceremoniously brought back to earth. Analyzing data based on thousands of young people, they found “almost no long-term emotional costs” when those expectations weren’t realized.

Finally, in a small, unpublished study of the effects of helicopter parenting on college students, Keene State’s Montgomery did not discover any “sense of entitlement” or exploitative behavior; if anything, the closely monitored students tended to be somewhat anxious -- while, at the same time, displaying certain positive qualities such as “the capacity to love, feel supported, and seek out social connections.”

Even if a researcher did show that today’s youth were unusually self-centered, we might be inclined to attribute that to an extraordinary emphasis on achievement and winning in

contemporary America, schooling that's focused on narrowly defined academic skills, excessive standardized testing, copious amounts of homework, and a desperate competition for awards, distinctions, and admission to selective colleges. Indeed, earlier research has shown that competitive individuals -- or people who have been instructed to compete -- tend to be less empathic and less generous.

In any case, neither logic nor evidence seems to support the widely accepted charge that we're too easy on our children. Yet that assumption continues to find favor across the political spectrum. It seems, then, that we've finally found something to bring the left and the right together: an unsubstantiated critique of parents, an unflattering view of kids, and a dubious belief that the two are connected.

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