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For today's kids, everything is all about them

One study blames parents for a failure to say, 'No'

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With a recent study showing that today's college students are the most narcissistic and self-centered in decades, a small chorus of professionals is offering a bold response: We have no one to blame but ourselves.

"Things went too far," says psychologist Jean Twenge, lead author of the study and a professor at San Diego State University.

What she means is that parents overcorrected for the harshness of a previous generation that preferred children to be "seen and not heard." She points to the soccer trophies that coaches hand out to all team members just for showing up rather than to a few for outstanding athleticism, and to a song taught in a colleague's daughter's preschool to the tune of "Frère Jacques": "I am special/I am special/Look at me."

"If you're that child, it's not surprising that pretty soon you start to believe it," says Twenge, whose new book, "Generation Me," examines feelings of entitlement among young Americans.

In her analysis, which uses a questionnaire that has been administered to college students periodically since 1982, a nationwide sample of 16,000 students choose among 80 statements to best describe themselves — for instance, "I think I am a special person," or, "I am no better or no worse than most people." Thirty percent more students had elevated narcissism in the 2006 survey than in 1982, although the numbers have been steadily creeping up over the years.

Called the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, the study does not directly link children's increased entitlement to parenting style, but the connection is inescapable, says social psychologist and researcher Robert Horton of Wabash College in Indiana. Parent educators have long identified four styles of parenting: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and passive. The styles are based on a combination of how loving and restrictive parents are.

In the authoritarian style, parents are not very affectionate but very controlling, says Horton. Permissive parents tend to lavish love but are barely able to impose limits or consequences, and passive parents tend to be literally unavailable as well as unreliable and unpredictable.

"The ideal is to express affection and set limits in a way that respects a child's feelings," says parent educator Nancy Samalin, director of the Parent Guidance Workshops in New York City. She's describing the authoritative style, probably the most labor intensive. It demands a careful balance between loving and restricting a child, between being involved but not suffocating. "It's a parent who sees the need for limits and is willing to be unpopular," says Samalin, author of the best-seller "Loving Without Spoiling."

Increasingly, being unpopular makes parents uncomfortable, says psychologist David Walsh of Minneapolis.

"Humans are born hard-wired with certain drives," he says — for instance, to fight or flee, to seek pleasure rather than pain, and to seek connection. "Think of the drives as a team of horses. If you learn how to hold the reins and manage the horses, they take you to wonderful places. If the horses get out of control — if one drive dominates — you end up in a ditch."

Today's college kids are in the ditch called narcissism in part because the popular culture glamorizes the drive for pleasure above all others. " 'More! Fast! Easy! Fun!' " Walsh says. "That translates to parents as an allergic reaction to our children's unhappiness and an inability to say no for fear it will destroy their self-esteem."

Discipline deficit disorder — a term he coined — is the result. "The symptoms include impatience, disrespect, inability to delay gratification, self-centeredness and rampant consumerism. Guess what? Those are also the characteristics of narcissism," says Walsh, author of "No: Why Kids of All Ages Need to Hear It and Ways Parents Can Say It."

He tells a story of one way this played out in his own parenting. When his children were young, he and his wife assigned them chores knowing that would help build a sense of responsibility. His 6-year-old daughter's chore was the bathroom. "She was doing a 6-year-old's version of cleaning," he says. "I came by and said, 'Let me show you.' Before long, she disappeared. My wife came along and asked, 'Do you want a clean bathroom or a competent daughter?' "

Whether it was his wish to make things easier for his daughter or easier for himself doesn't matter. Either way, he says, she got the message that she was entitled. Continually bailing children out or doing for them what they should do for themselves — the book report, the science project — describes the permissive style of parenting.

"By not giving them practice in handling frustration and disappointment we destroy self-esteem, not build it," he says.

Could this report end up spurring a backlash from parenting experts who call for a return to authoritarian parenting, which endorses spanking as well as a "because-I-said-so" attitude?

"I hope not. There's a lot of research that says spanking is a bad idea," says Twenge, who is the mother of a 4-month-old. Instead, she hopes the report will prompt parents to step back and examine their parenting.

"We live in a very individualistic culture. Telling each child he or she is special is based on the premise that building self-esteem leads to good outcomes. It works the other way around: Good outcomes lead to self-esteem. What people thought builds self-esteem turns out to build narcissism."

The four types of parents

The authoritative parent

Affectionate and engaged

Sets limits and enforces consequences

Uses reason, logic and appropriate negotiation

Empowers a child's decision-making

His or her child is likely to be:

Happy, responsible and kind

Good at problem-solving

Self-motivated and confident

Cooperative

An excellent student

A leader

The authoritarian parent

Emotionally aloof

Bossy; likely to say, 'Because I said so'

Uses physical punishment or verbal insults

Dismisses a child's feelings

His or her child is likely to be:

Moody and anxious

Well-behaved

An average to good student

A follower

The permissive parent

Affectionate

Anxious to please, ends every sentence by asking, 'OK?'

Indulgent

Can't say no and stick to it

Easily manipulated

His or her child is likely to be:

Demanding and whiny

Easily frustrated

Lacking kindness and empathy

A poor to average student

A follower

The passive parent

Emotionally removed or indifferent

Uninvolved

Abdicates discipline

Inconsistent and unpredictable

His or her child is likely to be:

Clingy and needy

Inappropriate and rude

Likely to get into trouble

A poor student

A follower