

# Overparenting and the Narcissistic Pursuit of Attachment

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*Parental love, which is so moving and at bottom so childish, is nothing but the parent's narcissism born again, which transformed by object-love, unmistakably reveals its former nature.*

— Sigmund Freud<sup>1</sup>

In Book One of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the goddess, Venus, goes to meet her mortal son, Aeneas, in a forest outside of Carthage. His voyage from Troy to Italy has been waylaid by a storm conjured up by the ever-menacing Juno.

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There is no doubt he is in a bad way. In an unfamiliar land and way off course, needy and unsure of the future, Aeneas has lost seven of his ships that were conveying all that remains of his homeland, Troy, to their desired destination, Rome. Given Aeneas's tenuous situation, Venus feels as though this would be a good moment for some divine assistance. Disguising herself as a huntress, she gives him maternal support and instruction and assures him that all will be well. In parting, and to ensure that no more harm will come to him, Venus shrouds Aeneas and his companion in a protective cloud, which they can see out of, but no one can see into.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, we all recognize and sympathize with Venus's maternal instincts. Things have been hard on her son, the universe has been decidedly hostile toward him, and having landed in Carthage, a town dear to her mortal enemy, Juno, he is once again in a perilous situation. We understand her thinking in that moment that wrapping him in this misty cloak will protect him from further harm. On the other hand, her actions seem unnecessary, as she has already received assurances from Jupiter about the ultimate success of Aeneas's mission. Furthermore, the bubble does exert a blurring force on Aeneas's intellectual apparatus, as we see him misinterpret events as they unfold. In this regard, Venus's efforts to re-womb Aeneas seem regressive, designed more to appease her anxiety than to help her son navigate his situation.

The protection offered by the goddess to her war-weary son, Aeneas, chronicled over 2 millennia ago reflects a more contemporary cultural trend best described as overparenting. Overparenting stems from an exaggeration of the parents' normal narcissistic identification with their child. Informed by an intense wish to foster the basis for a secure attachment and sense of well-being in their children, the parent whose own self-esteem is crucially dependent on their child's success in these endeavors especially reinforces this pressure.

Indeed, overparenting itself may suggest attachment problems in the parent. Among the signs of overparenting, we include the overscheduling and micromanaging of the child's life from an early age, leaving very little to chance and virtually no room for the autonomous cognitive, affective, physical, and spiritual discoveries that may result from free time and play. It includes excessive reinforcement of self-esteem, early concern about admission to selected preschool programs, challenges to elementary and secondary teachers and administration, insistence upon formalized extracurricular participation and achievement, a near frantic pressure for their child to matriculate in top colleges, and so-called helicopter parenting as the child launches from home.

In psychological terms, overparenting includes an excessive involvement with and concern about the child's mental state and adaptive capacity that leads to a relative absence of space for the development of structuralized self and object relations. This also involves difficulty with separation, especially evident as the child leaves home. Furthermore, overreaching advocacy on the child's behalf interferes with the development of the ego ideal and superego, making it difficult for the growing child to assume agency for a mistake made or his own achievement. The sequelae of this level of parental involvement can be seen in a dramatic increase in demand for college counseling services for students with severe adjustment disorders, presentations of low self esteem, and ongoing difficulties in feeling autonomous, as well as disorders of the self, represented not as much by cognitive or instrumental deficits, but more with feelings of emptiness and confusion about direction.

Although some version of the phenomenon is alluded to in some of the previous work as enmeshment and failures in separation and individuation, it is the premise of this contribution that overparenting is the result of parental narcissism that leads to one or both parents

misapplying current and increasingly supported tenets of attachment theory. A further internal source of the pressure is the parent's inability to handle his or her own aggression and problems with separation. The hovering and controlling parent represents a compromise formation between nurturance and aggression. An external source of the anxiety reinforcing the misapplication of attachment theory is the parental concern that, in the face of the ever-widening gap between economic classes, their children will end up in the ranks of the have-nots. Late 20th-century efforts to understand these phenomena are seen in the work of Mahler<sup>3</sup> and Blos,<sup>4</sup> who wrote about the vicissitudes of separation-individuation during various phases of development. Rothstein's<sup>5</sup> work on the narcissistic pursuit of perfection also hinted at these problems, and Ornstein<sup>6</sup> wrote about grandiosity and the growing failure of appropriate idealization in changing patterns in parenting.

## THE MANY DIMENSIONS OF NARCISSISM

It is nearly a century that has elapsed since Freud<sup>1</sup> began his efforts to define narcissism in dynamic terms. During that time, the concept has ranged from a developmental process and diagnostic state to a way of being in the world and from a psychological structure to a state of mind, and most recently to a characterological entity.

Freud's definition began with his formulation that associated sexual energy, or libido, with the autoeroticism of infancy. This libido is invested in the self as primary narcissism. In the course of the self's association with care giving objects and the environment, the libido gradually shifts to those attachments. When in the normal course of development there are frustrations in this attachment, the libido withdraws from the object(s) and reattaches to the self and is then referred to as secondary narcissism. As he moved toward the structural point of view, Freud characterized this narcissism as "the li-

bidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self preservation.”<sup>1</sup> Since then, the definition of narcissism in the psychodynamic literature has focused on the self, the self as used in a libidinal cathexis of the self, the self-representation, or simply as self-esteem.<sup>5</sup>

The division of narcissism into normal and pathological began with Freud’s earliest work on narcissism and involved his oft-repeated differentiation of the conditions informed by the transference neurosis from those by a narcissistic neurosis. With respect to a more or less normal narcissism, or secondary narcissism, and in line with elements of our thesis, he makes the point about normally affectionate parents that:

“... they are under a compulsion to ascribe every perfection to the child — which sober observation would find no occasion to do — and to conceal and forget all his shortcomings. Moreover, they are inclined to suspend in the child’s favor the operation of all the cultural acquisitions, which their own narcissism has been forced to respect, and to renew on his behalf the claims to privileges which were long ago given up by themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

Alongside the various dimensions in which the concept has been considered, the tension between normal and pathological narcissism is maintained through the decades and by most writers.<sup>7</sup> Freud, however, began the path that involved a turning inward, an investment in the self that had adaptive as well as potentially pathological implications.

Ten years later, this inward turning took on a different form with the development of a more sophisticated concept of the ego and its implementation in the structural theory. This led to a shift from the idea of secondary narcissism to one of a developmental process associated with identification and the incorporation of the idea of narcissism into the ego, ego ideal and superego. Thus, secondary narcissism is considered a “precipitate of abandoned object-cathexis and [the ego] contains the history of those object choices.”<sup>8</sup> In this regard, whenever a

parent perceives a shortcoming in the child, there is a re-experiencing of the abandonment and possibly a defensive effort at restitution, an effort to fix it and have the child achieve more or better.

Writers who followed, such as Andreas-Salome, Wilhelm Reich, and Waelder shifted the emphasis from a developmental process to the function of narcissism as character armor. In this regard, narcissism could be present in both self and object love. In an echo of Freud’s allusion to perfection, Kohut proposed an idealizing libido that invests in both self and object representations. In response to the infant’s developmental pressures and tensions and the mother’s inevitable failures of attunement and timing, “the baby’s psychic organization ... attempts to deal with the disturbances by the building up of new systems of perfection.” These systems he labeled the “grandiose self” and the “idealized parent imago.”

Consistent with his efforts to integrate structural and object relations approaches, Kernberg saw the difference between normal and pathological narcissism related to the degree of differentiation and integration of libidinal and aggressive drives with psychic structure in the context of individuation and object constancy.<sup>9</sup> Sandler and Joffe<sup>10</sup> kept the focus of narcissism on positive self-esteem, and Stolorow<sup>10</sup> described it as a mental activity whose “function is to maintain the structural cohesiveness, temporal stability and positive affective coloring of the self-representation.”<sup>11</sup>

Arnold Rothstein<sup>5</sup> in his monograph provides a perspective that seems particularly relevant to the theme of overparenting. Following an extensive review of the literature, Rothstein proposes that narcissism refers to “a felt quality of perfection”<sup>5</sup> that is neither normal nor pathological. In pressing for or pursuing exceptional achievement so as to live up to the standards of the ego ideal and superego, narcissism also involves a distortion of reality in the sense of the loss of measure or proportion.

Rothstein continues that the pursuit of perfection may be viewed from the point of view of the self and from the point of view of the object. From the point of view of the self it has an affective component that involves a feeling of well being and experience of self esteem; there is a cognitive component that involves a concept of perfection with ideas of omniscience and omnipotence; and in the physical component that the body is attractive and functions well. The quality of perfection from the point of view of the object is represented in reverence and awe and exceptional performance. In the treatment situation this view of the object may be seen in an idealized transference.<sup>5</sup>

We are suggesting that similar processes as described by Rothstein<sup>5</sup> and intimated by Freud may be informing the overly invested parent’s view of and behavior toward and on behalf of their child. There are many dysfunctional consequences of this: the parent monitors much of what a child does, endlessly advocates for the child in the academic setting, orchestrates the child’s extra-curricular life on an hourly basis, chauffeurs and listens, and is in constant communication with the child via the ubiquitous electronic umbilical cord. Further, there is the parent whose efforts to control all the vicissitudes of their child’s life shades into intrusiveness, both on the affective life of the child as well as on their social environment.

In writing about the crisis in school discipline, Arum<sup>12</sup> makes the point that legislation resulting from the student rights movement paved the way for parents to advocate for preferential treatment for their children. Indeed, in the athletic arena, parents regularly lobby coaches and athletic directors to have their children taken on the varsity team, and then advocate for more playing time for them. But, as the following vignette shows, parental involvement in their child’s athletic life does not end with aggressive advocacy but often includes intrusive attempts to control all aspects of their child’s experiences on the team.

## VIGNETTE: TIM

Going into his senior year, Tim had experienced three very successful years on the varsity tennis team at Sherwood Academy. His game had noticeably improved and, with help from the coach Mr. B., had more effectively learned to control his violent temper on court. Tim had also benefited from Mr. B. — a teacher at the school — as his advisee in grades 9 and 10, during which Tim's parents often voiced concerns that Tim had difficulty advocating for himself and was often the target of middle school teasing and bullying. After Mr. B.'s first year with the team, Tim's father had written the headmaster a letter in broad praise of Mr. B.'s work with Tim and with the team, regularly inviting him for dinner and continuing the praise. In his senior year, however, Tim's behavior started to change. Although the team was experiencing its most successful of all of Tim's

4 years, he started missing practice, was quick to his old ways of anger on the court, and seemed curt to Mr. B. and his teammates. He frequently complained that he should be playing in the number-one rather than the number-three position, despite the fact that he never beaten the number one or two players in a full challenge match. He was, in fact, a formidable number-three player with chances of winning sectional honors at that spot. Mr. B., though, was concerned with Tim's absences from practice and had spoken to him about them, but did not feel as though their conversations were productive, often feeling as though Tim would avoid eye contact. Tim missed a practice the day after Mr. B. had seen him at a school event late the previous evening. Mr. B., in keeping with team policy about missing the practice before a match, did not play Tim in the next match. Tim's parents, without contacting Mr. B.,

demanded a meeting with him, the Athletic Director, and Tim, so that everyone could "hear Tim's side of the matter." They further remarked that the point of the meeting was to reclaim Tim's honor, and his mother pointed out that Mr. B. had been picking on Tim since the beginning of the season and suggested that this was the cause of Tim's poor attitude and his truancy issues.

Several things stand out from this vignette that support our observations on the narcissistic elements in overparenting. The first observation is the lack of proportion in the parent's response. Not only did they agree with their son's description of events, but they felt it necessary to convene school administration to hear their complaint. Rather than having Tim discuss the matter with his long-time coach and advisor, or even call Mr. B., they needed to appeal to higher authority. Furthermore, it is clear that in the face of even the extremely minor sanction of removing Tim from one match, the parents were willing to alter the good will and cordiality that had been established over several years.

A second aspect of the parent's response that bears notice is the move to displace blame and responsibility from their son and to place the problem on the shoulders of the coach whom they now considered capricious and irresponsible. Their persistent and aggressive attacks on Mr. B. in the meeting shielded Tim from any agency in the conflict, and, indeed, communicated to Tim that he was beyond reproach in this matter. This flagrant overprotection only thinly veiled the parent's feeling a narcissistic injury, first as a result of their son's misbehavior, and second that he was being dishonored every day in practice by enduring the indignity of his position.

Finally, the mother's concerns from Tim's middle school years, that her son was being picked on and could not advocate for himself, were conveniently projected onto another target, despite the fact that Mr. B. had been a staunch advocate for Tim during their 4-year history. Through their actions, the parents man-

aged to communicate to Tim that he was correct in thinking that he belonged at the top spot of the team and that anyone who thought otherwise should be aggressively challenged. In this way, the parents took the opportunity not only to avenge their son, but also to restore their own sense of wounded perfection.

### **NARCISSISM AND SEPARATION/ INDIVIDUATION**

These parental behaviors represent the parents' own narcissism, their difficulty separating from the child, or unresolved narcissistic conflicts and regressive tendencies in the child to which the parent is responding. Overparenting and the child's response are a version of enmeshment and neurotic dependency. In other words, it is a failure of the normal process of separation-individuation. Barnett,<sup>13</sup> for example, notes that "narcissism and neurotic dependency always occur together; both are efforts to solve problems of self-esteem and damage to the sense of self. Dependency sacrifices autonomy for care. Narcissism sacrifices autonomy for approval."<sup>13</sup>

Although what we are describing is the dilemma on the parents' side of the equation, Blos<sup>4</sup> eloquently describes the dilemma of the adolescent as he or she negotiates the shoals of new and intense physiological surges, separation from parental influences, and adaptation to a more complex external environment. He proposes that the attendant strains of this period lead to powerful and formative regressive trends that replicate earlier developmental phases: withdrawal of libido from the object and external world and reinvestment in the self (as in Freud's secondary narcissism); a re-experiencing of the powerful ambivalence toward parents that partly drove the toddler's first efforts at separation and individuation; and finally, the disturbing internal experience of self-importance and omnipotence and frightening loneliness and helplessness.

In this second individuation process, the adolescent is in a very confusing rela-

tionship to the parent "who is experienced partly or wholly as the one of the infantile period. This confusion is worsened whenever the parent participates in the shifting positions of the adolescent and proves unable to maintain his fixed place as an adult vis-à-vis the maturing child."<sup>4</sup> Thus, there is a more or less normal tendency in both the adolescent and his or her parent to blur the boundaries between them and collude in stimulating and sustaining intrusive and overprotective behaviors from one side and provocative and dependent behaviors from the other. To the extent that this enmeshed situation mobilizes unresolved conflicts and narcissistic issues in the parent, that parent may anxiously attempt to interfere with this otherwise necessary regression and the child's developing ego, sense of self, and individuation. As the adolescent struggles to manage his new internal and external dilemmas, it is not difficult to comprehend

much of the chaotic behavior of this phase of development. The overly invested parent, in an effort to contain these internal pressures and disturbing behaviors prematurely inhibits the regression required by the adolescent to free him or herself from the infantile pulls and identifications.

Ornstein<sup>6</sup> adds another dimension to this dilemma when writing about the issue of grandiosity and the failure of idealization in contemporary parenting. She suggests that in an effort to protect their children from the expectable frustrations associated with growth, a style of parenting has been established characterized by:

*"... frequent and indiscriminate praises for all of their children's activities. Indiscriminate praise is probably the most insidious in its results: the praise and exuberance that the parents exhibit at any manifestation of creativity or accomplishment sets up expectations*

*in the children's minds. Disappointments in these expectations can be profound enough to create self-loathing, depression, and suicidal ideation.*"<sup>6</sup>

The signs of overparenting in the secondary-school child become even more evident as they transition to college and beyond and are reflected in the current need for college counseling services to manage increased requests for services. The following case example highlights many of our themes.

#### **VIGNETTE: SHANNON**

Shannon, a 21-year-old senior, presented to the college's Psychological Services Office with a chief complaint of increasing anxiety and difficulties getting her work done. She also reported that her relationship of 2 years is "in trouble." She has been in therapy "off and on" since adolescence and stated that it has never been helpful. Now, however, she felt "desperate." She hoped that the therapist will "tell her what to do." Other than occasional weekend marijuana smoking, there is no history of substance abuse, nor has she reported any self-injurious behaviors or suicidal ideation. The oldest child in an intact family, Shannon reported a very close relationship with both parents. She describes her parents' dramatic attempts to help her through her academic and social career. For example, when she had difficulties making friends as a young child, her parents would hold a party for her and invite all her classmates. She also reported that when she struggled at school her parents would hire "the best tutors" to help her. Although she was grateful for such help, Shannon stated that her academic success feels "like a lie." She wonders, too, if her friendships are real since even now she feels as if she "buys them." She fears that without her parents' help she will "not make it." To that day, she reported calling her parents every night; and when in a fight with her boyfriend, she and her mother spent hours on the

phone "working it out." Recently, however, her mother stopped writing papers for her in order to "prepare her for the real world". Shannon is now so afraid to submit her work that she is in danger of failing her courses. She felt deserted and overwhelmed, "inadequate" to the tasks demanded of her. In addition, a recent fight with her boyfriend augmented her anxiety and precipitated the visit to the counseling service during which she expressed feeling controlled by her boyfriend and inadequate in the relationship. She often felt unable to live up to his expectations and alternately felt demanded upon by him and desperate to prove that she can "be everything to him." Both have agreed that they will break up when she graduates because it does not make sense for them to stay together after that. Bereft of an intimate relationship and plans for the future, Shannon felt lost.

The concerns raised by this young woman revealed that she is still coping with issues related to separation and individuation, has barely established a sense of personal agency, and, in an identification with her parents, is expecting that her therapist will tell her what to do. In fact, this expectation may go a long way to explain her not having found previous attempts at therapy useful. She has clearly turned her boyfriend into her parents with whom she now struggles with the very same issues that have not been resolved with them. These issues include feeling controlled, unable to live up to expectations, and the need to fulfill all of his needs. Thus, the second individuation phase of her adolescence is postponed several years, so that now, nearing graduation she feels empty, possibly raising questions about further development and adaptation.

Shannon's situation reminds one of Erikson<sup>14</sup> who noted in discussing the normally occurring stage of identity versus role diffusion, that late adolescents/young adults facing "... tangible adult tasks ahead of them are now primarily concerned with what they appear in the

eyes of others as compared to what they feel they are, and with the question of how to connect the roles and skills cultivated earlier with the occupational prototypes of the day."<sup>13</sup> Shannon herself describes her parents' intense efforts to "help" her write outstanding papers, obtain the most friends and utilize the best tutors, but she is nevertheless facing the world with a precarious sense of self and identity, a fragile if not desperately insecure attachment system and an uncertain future. In these descriptions, it is unclear if Shannon is speaking for herself or channeling her mother. It is also worth noting that the mother's long overdue decision to stop writing her papers, an effort to promote some autonomy, is basically undone by the regular evening long telephone conversations and endless problem solving.

#### **THE NARCISSISTIC PURSUIT OF ATTACHMENT**

The prospective patient's obviously impaired attachment system brings us to the role of the impact of attachment theory on the genesis of the overparenting phenomenon as well as a return to the child's early life. Since Bowlby's<sup>15</sup> original observations, attachment theory grew alongside traditional psychoanalytic thinking; but in the past 2 decades and with considerable empirical research, it has become more integrated into the intellectual as well as the cultural mainstream. Bowlby's idea that the infant and toddler are preoccupied with establishing an inner state of secure attachment contrasts with the Freudian idea of a more libidinal motivation and the vicissitudes of narcissistic investment in actual objects. Secure attachment makes possible the growing infant's capacity and willingness to explore while at the same time referencing the parent. From the point of view of the parent's mental process, however, secure attachment has a similar mental import as Rothstein's idea of a felt quality of perfection. That is, we are making the argument that in the parent's mind there is a mental state correspondence

between the child's feeling attached and secure and feeling perfect. Consequently, there is a blurring of boundaries about who is feeling perfect.

Secure attachment contrasts with avoidant, resistant, and disorganized patterns of attachment and is the basis for the creation of a representational system and symbolic thinking. Although it appears clear that secure attachment is the normal state of affairs, it is not a protective factor against psychopathology, but there is good evidence that the other patterns are associated with later disturbances. For purposes of our discussion, however, we are interested in the parental role in and developmental origins of secure attachment. Basically, this involves a response to the infant's smiling, crying, and exploratory behaviors with the parent having the child's mind in their mind. As Fonagy<sup>15</sup> points out: "... the parent's capacity to adopt the intentional stance towards a not-yet-intentional infant, to think about the infant in terms of thoughts, feelings, and desires in the infant's mind and in their own mind in relation to the infant and his or her mental state, is the key mediator of the transmission of attachment and accounts for classical observations concerning the influence of caregiver sensitivity."<sup>16,17</sup>

It is our argument that a key element in overparenting is an important modification or misapplication of this process in which parents end up putting their mind in the child's mind. That is, the parent, rather than struggling with the subtleties of creating the conditions for the child's mind to develop, is instead creating and shaping the child's mental landscape. Fonagy<sup>18</sup> following Winnicott, actually referred to this as the "alien self."<sup>18</sup> Instead of the mother containing, metabolizing, and marking the affect and the projections of the child, she swallows them and projects them back into the child.

According to Belsky<sup>19</sup> and more or less agreed upon by ego and self psychologists and object relation and attachment theorists,

the conditions to insure a secure attachment and basis for cognitive competence depend on "maternal sensitivity, responsiveness to distress, moderate appropriate stimulation, interactional synchrony and warmth, involvement and responsiveness."<sup>16</sup> All of these qualities provide the context for having the child's mind in mind. Under these conditions the infant will have the best opportunity to internalize those same qualities, especially including growing capacities to have the other's mind in mind and regulate his or her own affect. It is important to note that these conditions do not, however, mandate a perfect maternal mirroring of the child's mental state. For example, Winnicott's ideas of "good enough mothering," Erikson's balance<sup>14</sup> of positive and negative in instilling "basic trust," and Gergely's "contingency" suggest that the ideal situation is less than "perfect" in the sense that it gives the infant a somewhat more effective sense of containment. In other words, the infant can internalize that the affect he or she is experiencing is not all that there is in the moment, that mother is neither overwhelmed nor pushed away by the situation. Instead, as Fonagy<sup>16</sup> notes, the mother is thinking about the child's mental state, and "for this reflection to help the baby, it needs to consist of a subtle combination of mirroring and the communication of a contrasting affect."<sup>15</sup> This process is also referred to as "marked externalization" and is essential for molding together the necessary mirroring and pretend mode that is the basis for affect regulation and the further development of mind.<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that we are not talking about pathological interactional processes between parent and child such as abuse, incest or neglect. Rather, the kind of interference we are discussing is potential overconcern about and overinvolvement with the child and its attachments.

A very important manifestation of this over concern centers around the management of aggression. A central aspect of the narcissistic pursuit of attachment is the parental fear that too much aggres-

sion, either from the parent directed at the child or coming from the child to the parent, will not only seriously damage the relationship in the moment but may raise questions about ultimate attachment capability. An especially sensitive time for the promulgation of this dilemma is when there is a distressed infant or toddler who is hard to soothe, and the patience of the caretaker is severely tested and strained. These potentially tense interchanges become prominent again during the adolescent years when, as discussed earlier, regressive behaviors during the second individuation phase are prominent and replicate the infantile situation.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting how much aggression is mobilized in and represented by the overparenting behavior, even though the parent has in mind that he or she is doing their best while at the same time hating the child who is making them feel inadequate.

Interferences with the conditions necessary to form the complex and combined process of mirroring and marking may be triggered by several factors in the parent-child dyad and include: 1) unresolved narcissistic issues that extend to the pressing need in the parent for relatedness and perfectly secure attachment in and for the child; 2) factors such as depressive or anxious states, narcissistic injuries, or marital and family stresses that inhibit the mother's reflective capacity; 3) the child's age approximating that when the parent had a similar experience of unresolved conflict or trauma; 4) the child experiencing a disappointment or narcissistic injury that the parent personalizes; and 5) the child bringing complex temperamental issues to the relationship. We will also argue that economic factors and pressures for achievement in the contemporary social-cultural scene have a powerful role in interfering with this process in parents.

Given the behaviors that take place later in development, we propose that several possible dysfunctional responses occur when the abovementioned interferences are

at play. Among the most prominent, and the one most relevant to our thesis, are those in which the mother or parent is conveying or telling the child what he or she must be feeling with a certainty that takes precedence over what might be communicated by the child. Another possible response is to mirror the child's reaction without any distance, reinforcing the idea that what the child is intending or feeling accurately matches the actual situation. Finally, the mother may either ignore or exaggerate the distress. But it is our view that telling the child what he or she must be feeling based on what the mother is feeling, misinterpreting the feeling, or mislabeling the feeling is at the core of the narcissistic pursuit of attachment. The persistence of this kind of interaction through the toddler and early childhood years may significantly effect the process of separation and individuation, impair the capacity to develop symbolic thinking — particularly in the symbolic representation of mental states — and interfere with the crucial integration of equivalence and pretense that is such an important precondition for affect regulation. As noted earlier, these deficits can persist into adolescence and young adulthood.

### THE NEW GILDED AGE

*Patterns in childrearing are intimately related to the sociocultural milieu in which family life is embedded.*

— A. Ornstein<sup>6</sup>

In this last section, we argue that in addition to its being informed by attitudes of perfection and an idealized version of secure attachment, overparenting is a narcissistic response to the vicissitudes of contemporary standards of achievement and academic and economic success. The recent economic downturn that revealed the excesses of the new gilded age sheds some light on the extent of these pressures. An increasing gap between the financial haves and have nots in virtually all industrialized nations created a sense of panic in parents that their child would

end up on the wrong side of the equation. In this climate in which enough is never enough and the ideal goal upon completion of education is often a six-figure income, parents feel they must do what other parents are doing to enhance their child's chances.

There are several recent articles and books specific to the issue of overparenting. For the most part they have referenced the cultural context alluded to earlier in the work of Freud, Rothstein and Ornstein and in which the trend we have described is taking place. It begins with exhortations and techniques to maximize early childhood stimulation (Baby Einstein) and includes protective devices such as anti-bacterial products and “nanny-cams,” pre-school academic enhancers for reading and math, self-esteem promoters as in excessive birthday parties and graduation ceremonies from nursery school, a \$ 4 billion dollar tutoring industry that begins in elementary school, strenuous programs for extracurricular and athletic activities, special skills camps and, by late in high school, hiring private admissions counselors at great expense to help market the child to the best possible college.<sup>21,22</sup>

Pressures for academic success begin with the stress on the parents to assure admission of their child to the best preschool or nursery school and continue through college admission. It was not entirely clear when a father told his son, “Yale or jail,” just how much, at least from an intrapsychic point of view, he was kidding. This pressure, of course, becomes the main rationalization for overstructuring, micromanaging, and close scheduling of the child and young adolescent's life, indiscriminate reinforcement of self-esteem, the inclination toward tutoring for courses and standardized testing, and extracurricular involvement and achievement. In discussing the rise in cheating in Canadian, European, and Asian students, Honore<sup>23</sup> notes that test-driven schooling and the self-esteem

movement are major contributors. He points out that there is no evidence that promoting self-esteem enhances performance or creativity, and may, according to Cross<sup>24</sup> be contributing to immaturity.

Indeed, mirroring this movement in parenting, the past 2 decades in educational theory have seen a rise in self-esteem based instruction. Under this theory, academic performance increases when young students are praised and feeling good about themselves. Based on such a theory, teachers are trained to only praise success and ignore failure. This theory has expanded to all aspects of primary school life: from the absence of tests to the removal of competitive situations in even the most competitive of games. Many youth soccer leagues have scoreless games to ensure that everyone is a winner. It is only recently that, starting at the growing gap in performance in math and science in comparison with students in other industrialized nations, there has been a backlash against the self-esteem movement. This backlash is expressing itself in the call for a return to rigor throughout the curriculum.

Research on play in children between the ages of three and twelve years by Stuart Brown, MD, at the National Institute for Play<sup>25</sup> has shown the importance of unstructured or free play on the development of personal boundaries and empathic behaviors, the discovery of innate talents, and the acceleration of learning. The absence of a history of unstructured play in early life is associated with problems in later development and an increase in violent behaviors. Furthermore, his research suggests that the level of parental involvement in structuring every minute of a child's day, their effort to eradicate rough-and-tumble play in boys, and their efforts to oversanitize all areas where children recreate has the potential of seriously curtailing other areas of development, such as the ability to pursue curiosity, explore, and assess their own sense of risk and safety, and thus establish their

own borders and boundaries with the outside world. Finally, he suggests that this form of overparenting has the potential to seriously impair the spiritual growth of children, removing, as it does, their sense of possibility, their awe and wonder at the world, and their own agency within the broader context of human activity.

Although we have referred to this age as a new gilded age, for parents, it is clear that this is a new age of anxiety. A recent population boom — now coming to an end — has seen increasing competition for resources of all varieties. For college-bound students, spots at the top schools have become ferociously competitive. This competition has created pressure at earlier and earlier ages in the academic ladder. Furthermore, parents are receiving new information daily about threats to everyone's general sense of well-being: the planet is in peril, global terrorism is on the rise, natural resources may be waning, and now, economic setbacks are becoming very real for every socioeconomic class. It would seem quite natural, then, that in the face of these seemingly uncontrollable factors, parents have become increasingly vigilant about what they can control. We are suggesting that the move toward overparenting is an effort to control these natural anxieties, but in fact runs the risk of doing more harm than good.

## CONCLUSION

Much of the writing on narcissism has disregarded the impact of narcissism on the other. We have tended to think of the narcissist as interpersonally absent or exploitative but without regard to the consequences for the other. But the development of a false, alien, or non-cohesive self may well be a result of the relentless impingement of the narcissistic parent on their child, beginning with too forcefully telling the toddler and young child what it is they must be feeling or renaming dysphoric affect into something more palatable. It also

has the effect of making the child far more sensitive to the intentions, thoughts, and feelings of the other at the expense of an awareness of their own inner world.

These problems with the inner world become exacerbated when the child sees the parent trying to remold the external world to match the desired perfection of the created inner world. This remodeling of the external world is seen most powerfully when the parent becomes involved in the child's school life. On the extreme end of the spectrum, parental involvement in the academic life of the child shelters the child from the very real consequences of being in the world. When a parent turns the child's frustration into an angry e-mail or phone call to the school, the child is prevented from engaging in the powerfully maturational moments that come with frustration, loss, and disappointment. Furthermore, when parents seek to remove the realities of the external world from their children's experience, they collude with the distorted thought processes of a maturing mind and create an inner world that cannot tolerate disappointment and rejection. This inner world can forever seek to externalize negative and upsetting feelings, thus postponing still further successful integration into a difficult, competitive, and often hostile world for another period in the child's life when the stakes will be decidedly higher.

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