

The Psychological and Legal Risks for Children of Narcissistic Parents

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Introduction

- Individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) are pathologically grandiose, prone to anger, overly critical of others, irrationally resistant to criticism, lack empathy, exploit and manipulate others to meet their personal needs, and assign excessive blame to others to avoid personal responsibility.
- As parents, individuals with NPD are frequently psychologically and emotionally abusive.
- Bogacki and Weiss (2007) studied a sample of 300 defendants from child abuse and neglect cases, finding that 22% of the defendants scored positively for NPD on the MCMI-III (Bogacki & Weiss, 2007).
- Johnson, Cohen, Kasen, Ehrensaft and Crawford (2006) found that both mothers and fathers with personality disorders including NPD were three times more likely to report practicing more than five types of problematic child rearing behaviors (Johnson et al., 2006).

Characteristics of Narcissistic Parents

- Grandiose, obsessed with maintaining a sense of superiority and perfection (Shaw, 2010).
- Rarely acknowledges own behavior or attitudes as contributing to problems (Berg-Nielsen & Wichstrom, 2012).
- Lack of empathy (unaware of personal lack of empathy) and lack of forgiveness (Dimaggio, 2012).
- Fragile self-esteem; responds to embarrassment, shame, rejection and criticism with disproportionate hostility, rage and/or depression (Baum & Shnit, 2005; Diamaggio, 2012).
- More likely to struggle with co-parenting relationships, use attack mode, engage in hostile conflict rather than negotiating compromises (Baum & Shnit, 2005).
- Describes other parent in a dismissive, derogatory manner or idealistically (Caligor, Levy & Yeomans, 2015).
- Falsely accuses other parent of abuse or claims other parent is unfit without evidence (Summers & Summers, 2006).
- Alienates children from other parent. Alienated children are likely to speak of other parent with hatred (Darnell, 1998; Summers & Summers, 2006).

Characteristics of Narcissistic Parents

- Likelihood of comorbid disorders such as depression, bipolar disorder, substance abuse, and eating disorders, which can lead to suicide and abusive behaviors (Shaw, 2010).
- Self-absorbed and unresponsive to children's needs (Leeb, Mercy & Holt, 2012).
- Possessive; inconsistent discipline; minimal communication, praise and encouragement (Johnson et al., 2006).
- Envy and resents children's dependency, at the same time undermines children's attempts at independence (Mahoney, Rickspoon & Hull, 2016; Shaw, 2010).
- Projects personal sense of neediness, 'badness' and inferiority onto their children (Shaw, 2010).
- Perceive their children's accomplishments and failures as their own, taking personal credit for accomplishments and shaming their children for perceived failures (Mahoney, Rickspoon & Hull, 2016).

Psychological Risks

Psychological and emotional abuse by Narcissistic Parents

- Expose children to emotional turmoil, erratic behaviors and outbursts (Berg-Nielsen & Wichstrom, 2012).
- Hold distorted perceptions of children's behaviors, assign false blame, shame and humiliation (Berg-Nielsen & Wichstrom, 2012).
- May try to convince children to question their own sanity (Shaw, 2010).
- Controlling and domineering use of coercive projections (Shaw, 2010).
- Withdraw love as punishment for children's opposition or perceived failures (Mahoney, Rickspoon & Hull, 2016; Shaw, 2010).
- Envy and resents children's dependency (Shaw, 2010; Mahoney, Rickspoon & Hull, 2016).
- Micromanage children's lives, place excessive pressure for perfection, shame and humiliate children for actions and behaviors that do not live up to narcissistic standards (Munich & Munich, 2009).

Psychological Risks

Children unable to develop a healthy sense of self

- Associate dependency with shame and humiliation and independence with rejection and abandonment (Shaw, 2010).
- Feel parent's faults are their own faults (Berg-Nielsen & Wichstrom, 2012).
- Feel selfish if they are assertive (Rappoport, 2005).
- Difficulty experiencing oneself as a subject, rather as a depersonalized object of their parent's demands (Shaw, 2010).
- Feel shame associated with their personal needs (Mahoney, Rickspoon & Hull, 2016).

Future Psychopathology in Children

- Enmeshment and neurotic dependency (Munich & Munich, 2009)
- Greater possibility of developing NPD. Children are likely to inherit and repeat behaviors of narcissistic parents as a way of identifying with the narcissistic parents (Berg-Nielsen & Wichstrom, 2012; Summers & Summers, 2006).
- Affectionless control type of child rearing may induce depression and anxiety in children (Dentale et al., 2015).

Relational Disruptions

- Cumulative relational trauma leads to inability to develop inter-subjective relating capacities (Shaw, 2010).
- Overly responsible for parents' well being and the well beings of others (Mahoney, Rickspoon & Hull, 2016).
- Unable to penetrate parent's self absorption, develops a chronic obsession with pleasing others (Dutton, Denny-Keys & Sells, 2011).

Legal Risks

Children used to retaliate against spouse

- Exhibits a 'divide and conquer' mentality.
- Preps children to speak against other parent.
- Give children excessive sense of power and control to use against other parent (Summers & Summers, 2006).

Custody risks

- Risks of children experiencing negative psychological effects in the custody of a narcissistic parent when the other parent is not available to help correct maltreatment or prevent neglect (Berg-Nielsen & Wichstrom, 2012).

Legal Risks

- Research has shown that prevalence of psychiatric disorders is twice as likely for young children living with a single narcissistic parent than children living with both parents (Wichstrom et al., 2012).
 - Narcissistic parents are likely to claim ownership of children and threaten to keep other parent from ever seeing children (Summers & Summers, 2006).
 - As custodial parents, narcissistic parents often deny other parent access to any information regarding children (Summers & Summers, 2006).
- ### Prolonged legal battles
- Individuals with NPD react to criticism with defiant counterattack (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
 - Narcissistic parents are more likely to hinder the release of documents and exploit documents such as custody reports for personal advantage (Summers & Summers, 2006).
 - Some narcissistic parents believe they are above the law (Summers & Summers, 2006).

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