

## **Effects Parenting Styles Have on Narcissistic Tendencies: A Sensitive Period on the Development of Narcissism**

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### **Abstract**

Narcissism is one of the underlying maladaptive personality disorders that contribute to aggression, violence, entitlement, and inflated self-views within people. Not only is narcissism present in adults, narcissistic tendencies can also exist in children as young as three years old. Children develop maladaptive narcissistic tendencies due to, but not limited to, developmentally inappropriate parenting behaviors used at any point during the childhood and adolescent stages of development. Understanding that a potential sensitive period may exist in which a child is more susceptible to narcissistic tendencies due to parenting behaviors is an essential psychological question. To assess this question, I explored the effects different parenting styles may have on the development of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism within young children. Through analyzing different papers written on this topic, I studied the reasons why some parents may be projecting excessive parenting styles towards their children at such a young age. I also learned how parenting styles should change and adapt to the child's age and developmental stage because as children mature, they need different levels of discipline and responsiveness. Additionally, by reviewing several journal articles, I found that when children develop personality and emotion regulation strategies and how that period of development may affect when parenting styles have the most impact on the development of maladaptive narcissism in children. Research on the development of narcissism in children has focused on solely parenting styles and environments. Empirical research has not yet looked at the relationship between age and parenting styles in order to determine if a sensitive period exists in which children are more vulnerable to developing narcissistic tendencies as a result of excessive parenting qualities. Thus, future research should be designed and conducted on how age may impact the extent to which parenting styles may lead to children developing maladaptive narcissism.

**Keywords:** Narcissistic tendencies, Parenting qualities, Developmental level

### **1. Introduction**

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-V), Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is one of the Cluster B personality disorders along with Antisocial Personality Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder, and Histrionic Personality Disorder<sup>1</sup>. According to the DSM-V, a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning in early adulthood, characterizes NPD<sup>1</sup>. However, not everyone who is narcissistic suffers from NPD though characteristics of a narcissist are very similar to NPD. For instance, narcissists can be characterized by being excessively focused on having their own needs met as they are egocentrically focused<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, narcissism can be further separated into adaptive or maladaptive facets.

Adaptive narcissism is characterized by healthy ambitions, energy, creativity, and empathy, supported by an underlying sense of self that is firm and cohesive<sup>2</sup>. In contrast, maladaptive narcissism is characterized by self-aggrandizement, power-seeking, and condescension in which an inflated sense of self masks underlying feelings of vulnerability and insecurity<sup>2</sup>. In other words, adaptive narcissism consists of autonomy and is considered to be healthy

or normal; whereas, maladaptive narcissism is unhealthy or abnormal. Furthermore, there are two main dimensions of maladaptive narcissism: grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism. Grandiose narcissism refers to behaviors such as demanding admiration from others, superiority and entitlement, exploitation of others, low empathy, and grandiose fantasies<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, vulnerable narcissism refers to behaviors such as a drive to feel needed, feelings of helplessness and shame, and social avoidance, and they feel that their need for admiration or inclusion will not be met<sup>3</sup>.

Narcissistic traits may be particularly common in adolescents, but that does not necessarily indicate that the individual will go on to have NPD<sup>1</sup>. Studies have shown that although NPD is not present in adolescents, the origins of narcissism lie in childhood<sup>4</sup>. Since children do not have the psychological capacity to exhibit a personality disorder, it is rare to see narcissistic adolescents diagnosed with NPD. It is more common for researchers to diagnose children with narcissism, narcissistic tendencies, grandiose/vulnerable narcissism, or maladaptive narcissism.

Research has suggested that parenting qualities may be one of the causes of maladaptive narcissism found in children. Two theories in psychology have different perspectives and understandings on how parenting behavior may lead to narcissistic traits in young children. Social learning theory holds that children are likely to grow up to be narcissistic when they are overvalued by their parents<sup>4</sup>. Conversely, psychoanalytic theory holds that children are likely to grow up to be narcissistic when their parents lack warmth and express little affection, appreciation, and positive affect towards their children<sup>4</sup>. Both theories have empirical data that support their claims, so both social learning theory and psychoanalytic theory are plausible in describing the parental behaviors that may lead to children developing narcissism.

Despite the positive association between specific parenting styles and narcissism in adolescents, empirical research has also determined that, more broadly, developmentally inappropriate parenting styles may lead to children developing narcissism. Parenting styles that do not provide sufficient responsiveness, demandingness, and support for cognitive and physical development are likely to interfere with positive development because the child may begin to develop a sense of inadequacy, which may ultimately lead to the development of maladaptive narcissism<sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, unlike the effects of parenting styles on narcissism, not a large body of research has focused on how age may affect the development of narcissism in children. Since narcissism originates during childhood, it is crucial to have a deeper understanding of the kind of role that age may play in the development of maladaptive narcissistic tendencies in young children. Additionally, there has been virtually no empirical research conducted to determine if there is a sensitive period that exists in the development of maladaptive narcissism. In biological and psychological development, many natural phenomena have a sensitive period in which the effects of the stimulant are the most influential. For example, Bailey and Penhune (2012) found that early-trained musicians were better able to complete the given musical tasks compared to late trained musicians and non-musicians<sup>5</sup>. Bailey and Penhune then suggested that there exists a sensitive period for musical training that may have a specific impact on sensorimotor synchronization abilities<sup>5</sup>.

The sensitive period for child narcissism may be during the earlier years of adolescence because that is the time where children are developing vital psychosocial skills, such as emotion regulation skills. Emotion regulation refers to the initiation, maintenance, and enhancement of both positive and negative emotions<sup>6</sup>. Emotion regulation involves the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions to accomplish one's goal<sup>6</sup>. Emotion regulation abilities develop during the ages of three to nine as that is when amygdala activation to emotional faces increases, indicating that amygdala sensitivity to emotionally relevant information is increasing<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, clinical and empirical evidence has underlined the existing relationship between the development of emotional regulation and parenting behaviors<sup>6</sup>. Thus, a sensitive period could exist during childhood development, specifically during early childhood, which makes children vulnerable to narcissistic tendencies as a result of developmentally inappropriate parenting behaviors.

## **2. Combinations of Parenting Qualities**

Because combinations of excessive or insufficient parenting qualities are more detrimental to the psychological development of children compared to one extreme or lacking parenting quality, it is more likely for children to present narcissistic tendencies when exposed to more than one parenting quality that is excessive or insufficient. Previous empirical research found that particular parenting styles, such as authoritarian, authoritative, indulgent, and indifferent, may lead to children developing adaptive or maladaptive narcissistic tendencies. These listed parenting styles, however, are broad and encompass more specific qualities such as the level of responsiveness, level of discipline, and

level of warmth. In order to understand how parenting behaviors may impact the development of narcissism in children, it is essential to dive deeper into the specific qualities that the overall parenting styles may include.

In “Parental Invalidation and the Development of Narcissism,” Huxley and Bizumic (2017) conducted a study on the influence of parental invalidation and narcissism with 442 participants<sup>3</sup> and found positive correlations between the tested parenting behaviors. Huxley and Bizumic found that parental coldness and parental rejection were positively associated ( $r = 0.65, p < 0.001$ ), parental overprotection and parental rejection were positively associated ( $r = 0.47, p < 0.001$ ), and parental overprotection and parental coldness were positively associated ( $r = 0.22, p < 0.001$ )<sup>3</sup>. Huxley and Bizumic found that parental coldness, parental rejection, and parental overprotection were positively correlated with one another, suggesting that particular parenting qualities may be projected towards children concurrently rather than independently. Huxley and Bizumic’s results raise the question of how the effects of one independent parenting quality differ from the effects of more than one parenting quality in terms of child narcissism.

In “Overparenting and Narcissism in Young Adults: The Mediating Role of Psychological Control,” Winner and Nicholson (2018) conducted a study with 476 young adult college students who were recruited from a university in southeastern United States<sup>8</sup>. Winner and Nicholson found that both overparenting and parental psychological control (PPC) were significant predictors of grandiose narcissistic traits with beta values of 0.41 and 0.43 and 95% CI of [0.15-0.67] and [0.08-0.79] respectively<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, Winner and Nicholson found that both the direct effect ( $\beta = 0.37, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.12-0.63]$ ) and indirect effect ( $\beta = 0.04, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.004-0.11]$ ) of overparenting through PPC on grandiose narcissism were significant, indicating that PPC is a mediator between overparenting and grandiose narcissism<sup>8</sup>. Winner and Nicholson also found that both overparenting and PPC were significant predictors of vulnerable narcissistic traits with beta values of 0.93 and 2.11 and 95% CI of [0.44-1.42] and [1.48-2.75] respectively<sup>8</sup>. Winner and Nicholson stated that the direct effect of overparenting on vulnerable narcissism remained significant ( $\beta = 0.74, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.27-1.21]$ ), while the indirect effect of overparenting through PPC was also significant ( $\beta = 0.19, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.03-0.40]$ ), indicating that PPC serves as a mediator<sup>8</sup>. The results of Winner and Nicholson’s study demonstrated how, individually, overparenting and PPC are positively correlated to both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, but PPC could also be viewed as a mediator between overparenting and narcissism to yield similar results. In other words, the combination of overparenting and PPC was also positively correlated with grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, suggesting that interrelated parenting behaviors could also lead to children developing grandiose and vulnerable narcissism.

Similarly, in “Parenting and Adolescent Grandiose Narcissism: Mediation Through Independent Self-Constraint and Need for Positive Approval,” Eberly-Lewis, Vera-Hughes, and Coetzee (2018) developed the SEM model in a study of 460 adolescents ages 15-18, which suggested that maternal positive parenting and discipline do not directly predict grandiose narcissism<sup>9</sup>. Instead, maternal positive parenting and discipline are indirectly related to grandiose narcissism with the need for positive approval as a mediator. Eberly-Lewis et al. (2018) found that a need for positive approval mediated patterns from mothers’ parenting to grandiose narcissism, and a need for positive approval mediated maternal discipline in predicting narcissism<sup>9</sup>. Results from Eberly-Lewis et al.’s study, like Winner and Nicholson (2018), found that positive approval served as a mediator for the indirect effect of maternal positive parenting and discipline on the development of grandiose narcissism. On the other hand, unlike Winner and Nicholson, Eberly-Lewis et al. (2018) found that maternal positive parenting and discipline individually did not directly predict grandiose narcissism. These findings indicate that there are parenting qualities that may not predict grandiose narcissism unless there is another parenting behavior present that serves as a mediator.

In “Are Parenting Practices Associated with the Development of Narcissism? Findings from a Longitudinal Study of Mexican-Origin Youth,” Wetzel and Robins (2016) conducted a longitudinal study on 674 Mexican-origin children (50% female) and their families on parental hostility and parental monitoring’s effects on narcissism<sup>10</sup>. Wetzel and Robins tested whether parenting dimensions had interactive effects on narcissism and found that the association between paternal hostility and exploitativeness was stronger for higher levels of monitoring (interaction effect  $b = 0.17; p < 0.001$ ) and for higher levels of warmth (interaction effect  $b = 0.14; p < 0.001$ )<sup>10</sup>. Also, Wetzel and Robins found that the association between paternal hostility and superiority was stronger for higher levels of monitoring (interaction effect,  $b = 0.10; p = 0.041$ )<sup>10</sup>. Wetzel and Robins found that paternal hostility, a parenting quality, and exploitativeness, a characteristic of narcissism, were positively associated. Similar to Winner and Nicholson (2018) and Eberly-Lewis et al. (2018), Wetzel and Robins (2016) claimed that the association between paternal hostility and exploitativeness was stronger when there were higher levels of monitoring and warmth, which suggests that other parenting qualities may heighten the effects of parenting behaviors on children’s development of narcissistic tendencies. Though Wetzel and Robins did not refer to monitoring and warmth as a mediator, the overall effects of higher levels of monitoring and warmth are similar to Winner and Nicholson’s (2018) finding on how PPC can serve as a mediator overparenting and narcissism and Eberly-Lewis et al.’s (2018) finding on how positive approval may be a mediator for maternal positive parenting and discipline on grandiose narcissism. In addition, like Huxley and

Bizumic (2017), Wetzel and Robins (2016) found that the correlation between paternal hostility and superiority, two parenting qualities, was greater for higher levels of monitoring, another parenting quality. Wetzel and Robins' finding further demonstrates how certain parenting qualities, such as hostility, superiority, and monitoring, may coincide.

Additionally, in "Her Majesty the Baby: Narcissistic States in Babies and Young Children," Hurley (2017) presented a case study with one of her patients, Leisha, who was a young girl who had psychotherapy sessions once a week for four years when she was five years old<sup>11</sup>. Hurley stated that Leisha suffered an inordinate amount of deprivation and abuse in her early years and her past experiences as a young child contributed to her bossy, controlling, and narcissistic behavior<sup>11</sup>. Hurley's observations and findings on how Leisha's past experiences of deprivation and abuse may have led to her narcissistic behavior supports how specific combinations of parenting qualities that a child experiences at a young age, such as lack of responsiveness (deprivation) and high levels of discipline (abuse) may contribute to the development of narcissistic tendencies soon after.

Similarly, in "The Making of a Narcissist," Imbesi's (1999) patient, Milly, was referred for therapy by the private preschool she was attending because of repeated aggressive behavior toward other children and frequent temper tantrums<sup>12</sup>. Imbesi stated that when Milly stayed with her father, he was quite indulgent, and her mother's behavior was a mixture of guilty overindulgence and emotional withdrawal<sup>12</sup>. Imbesi stated that Milly's mother rarely disciplined her or set limits, allowing Milly to dictate to her. For example, the child decided when and where she went to bed<sup>12</sup>. Imbesi's description of Milly's early life at home consisted of overindulgence by both of her parents in addition to her mother's lack of responsiveness and discipline. Imbesi's other patient, Linda, would describe herself as having been "a little dictator" at home and having had total control of both parents<sup>12</sup>. Imbesi stated that Linda remembers having been the center of her mother's attention until age 10, at which time the mother began to spend less time with her<sup>12</sup>. Like Milly, Linda's parents were overindulgent, and her mother and father showed low levels of discipline. Both Milly and Linda presented narcissistic tendencies during their therapy sessions, which Imbesi claimed was due to their parents' behavior during the early years of childhood. Milly and Linda were not exposed to only one parenting quality, but several qualities that were detrimental to their development of adaptive narcissism. Imbesi's findings in her case studies with Milly and Linda indicates that parenting qualities may come as a combination, and those combinations of parenting qualities may lead to children developing narcissism at a young age.

### **3. Developmentally Inappropriate Parental Behaviors**

Because from infancy to adolescence, children are developing their personalities, emotional regulation strategies, and other psychosocial tasks, if parental behaviors do not change and are developmentally inappropriate for the age of the child, it may lead to the child presenting narcissistic tendencies. Parenting qualities that are not appropriate for the child may hinder the development of adaptive narcissism. For instance, high levels of discipline and low levels of responsiveness towards a young child could lead to insufficient early gratification from parents, which may cause the child to develop habits that seek approval and validation from others due to feelings of inadequacy. In contrast, low levels of discipline and high levels of responsiveness could lead to over gratification of the child, which may cause the child to develop superiority, entitlement, and inflated self-views. The parenting styles used to raise children should be adaptable to the different stages of development that each child goes through.

Imbesi (1999) stated in her case studies with Milly and Linda that both mothers were unable to set appropriate limits with their children, which allowed the children to control them and the household<sup>12</sup>. Imbesi also stated that in Milly, her four-year-old patient lived in a household where there was a lack of boundaries, including generational boundaries<sup>12</sup>. Imbesi claimed that after Milly's mother decided to engage in therapy for herself, she was able to use her authority as a mother more appropriately and to establish boundaries<sup>12</sup>. Imbesi then mentioned that by the end of therapy, Milly was able to make and sustain friends her age, had rare instances of aggression, and was able to accept limits and tolerate frustration<sup>12</sup>. Imbesi's case studies with Milly and Linda demonstrate the importance of appropriate boundaries for a child's psychosocial development. Not only did Imbesi find that the inability to set appropriate generational boundaries may have led to narcissistic tendencies within Milly and Linda, but the evidence also signified that an adjustment to parenting behaviors might result in the decrease of narcissistic tendencies within the child. However, it is crucial to note that Imbesi observed the decrease in narcissistic tendencies due to a change in parenting behaviors only in the 4-year-old patient, so the results cannot be generalized towards populations of older ages.

Additionally, Imbesi worked with over 100 other children who attended psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy from one to three times per week<sup>12</sup>. Out of these children, Imbesi only diagnosed 3 of them with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD)<sup>12</sup>. Imbesi labeled undiagnosed children as "welfare children"<sup>12</sup>. Imbesi stated that the welfare children's histories contained neglect, abuse, and significant familial disorganization<sup>12</sup>. Imbesi stated that the

welfare mothers demonstrated inconsistency in their parenting, ambivalence, aggression, a narcissistic use of their children, as well as neglect; however, because of the reality of these families' lives, namely poverty and a multitude of children in the families, there was little danger of the children's being pampered and overindulged<sup>12</sup>. Also, Imbesi claimed that the welfare mothers did not allow the children to control them, and the fathers frequently disciplined the children<sup>12</sup>. Unlike Milly and Linda's parents, the welfare children's families did not overindulge, nor did they overly discipline their children, which allowed for generational boundaries to be put in place for the children to follow. The children in the study did not experience developmentally inappropriate parenting styles. Instead, they experienced parenting behaviors that allowed the children to face adversity and grow from frustrating experiences.

Hurley (2017) worked with Mark, a four-year-old boy, who was referred by his general practitioner due to his phobic behavior<sup>11</sup>. Hurley described Mark as precocious with apparent narcissistic self-sufficiency and pseudo-confidence<sup>11</sup>. Hurley contended that Mark's narcissistic tendencies stemmed from his parents' hesitation towards giving Mark necessary developmental pushes forward and outward from the family<sup>11</sup>. Similar to Imbesi's case studies, Hurley (2017) explained that once Mark's family shifted towards a more generational divide where Mark's place as the child in the family was firmly established, he successfully got through the transition of starting school<sup>11</sup>. Additionally, Hurley claimed that Mark emerged from his narcissistic tendencies only when his parents became more proactive in allowing him to experience more frustration and stopped acceding to some of his unrealistic demands<sup>11</sup>. The observational results from Hurley's study with Mark were very similar to Imbesi's (1999) results with Milly following psychotherapy. The relationship between appropriate parenting qualities and the development of maladaptive narcissism became clearer as there is an agreement between the observations reported in Imbesi and Hurley's (2017) case studies. Additionally, a common trend observed in young children through Imbesi (1999) and Hurley's (2017) case studies is that narcissistic effects of developmentally inappropriate parenting behaviors are reversible once parenting styles were modified to create the necessary generational boundaries.

#### **4. Parents' Projection of Stress and Anxiety**

Because parents may project their feelings of stress and anxiety towards their children, those feelings may be direct or mediating factors that may lead to excessive parenting behaviors that could eventually lead to the children developing narcissistic tendencies. Research has suggested that parenting qualities may serve as a cause of narcissistic tendencies in children, but it is also crucial to continue to look for the origin of narcissism, which may be particular feelings that parents may feel, such as anxiety and stress. Parents' feelings of stress and anxiety may serve as a precursor to excessive parenting styles, such as overparenting or high levels of discipline, that could lead to children developing maladaptive narcissistic tendencies during the early years of adolescence.

In "Parent and Child Traits Associated with Overparenting," Segrin, Woszildo, Givertz, and Montgomery (2013) found in their study of 653 volunteer participants of parent-adult child dyads that there was a significant path from anxiety to overparenting in terms of parental behavior<sup>13</sup>. Segrin et al. (2013) found that parental anxiety and overparenting were positively associated with a beta value of 0.14 at  $p < 0.01$ <sup>13</sup>. Because Segrin et al. found that anxiety was positively correlated with overparenting, anxiety within parents may play a role in the development of narcissism through overparenting. Segrin et al. found a significant positive association between overparenting and adult child reports of narcissism and dysfunctional coping ( $\beta = 0.11, p < 0.01, \beta = 0.10, p < 0.05$ )<sup>13</sup>. Segrin et al. stated that adult children reported higher narcissism and less functional coping to the extent that they and their parents reported greater overparenting<sup>13</sup>. Similarly, in "Parental Invalidation and the Development of Narcissism," Huxley and Bizumic (2017) found that parental overprotection was significantly and positively associated with both phenotypes of narcissism, grandiose and vulnerable ( $r = 0.21, r = 0.20$  at  $p < 0.001$ )<sup>3</sup>. Segrin et al. (2013) and Huxley and Bizumic (2017) both found that overparenting was positively associated with narcissism. Segrin et al. (2013) and Huxley and Bizumic's (2017) results suggest that parental anxiety may play a role in the development of narcissism with overparenting involved. It is difficult to make any other conclusions because Segrin et al. (2013) only found an association between anxiety and overparenting; therefore, it is unknown whether parental anxiety causes overparenting or overparenting causes parental anxiety.

Similar to Segrin et al. (2013), Hurley (2017) found that her patient's parents' fears and anxieties lead to the development of maladaptive narcissistic tendencies in their son<sup>11</sup>. Mark, Hurley's patient, was receiving psychotherapy due to his extreme attachment to his mother and extreme phobic behaviors<sup>11</sup>. Hurley found that Mark's parents viewed the world as a dangerous place, which, in turn, curtailed their inclination to give Mark the necessary developmental push forward and outward from the family<sup>11</sup>. Hurley claimed that Mark's parents' unconscious overprotection lead to Mark's surface layer of narcissistic self-sufficiency, pseudo-confidence, and bossy exterior<sup>11</sup>.

Hurley's case study with Mark directly demonstrates how parents' fears and anxieties may be an indirect factor for the development of narcissism. Due to Mark's parents' fear and anxiousness of the dangerous world, Hurley claimed that they resorted to overprotection in order to protect Mark. In turn, Mark developed narcissistic tendencies due to the overprotectiveness that his parents projected towards him during the early years of his childhood.

Imbesi (1999) found that parental fears and anxieties may lead to indulgent parenting rather than overparenting. Imbesi presented two case studies of a young girl named Milly and a woman named Linda, who were referred to her for psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy for narcissistic tendencies. Imbesi stated that both of the mothers of her patients were unable to set appropriate limits with their children, allowing the children to control them and the household<sup>12</sup>. Both mothers were depressed, felt victimized, and had a denigrated view of women, which gave Imbesi good reason to believe that because they felt like downtrodden, helpless victims that they unconsciously encouraged aggressiveness in their children through fear and overindulgence<sup>12</sup>. Unlike Hurley's (2017) case study, Imbesi (1999) found that parental fears and anxieties may lead to indulgent parenting. Milly and Linda's mothers were overindulgent because of the guilt their mothers felt during their childhood years. Hurley (2017) and Imbesi's (1999) observations with their respective patients further suggest that depending on the reasoning behind parental fears and anxieties, the resulting parenting behaviors may differ. For instance, Mark's parents in Hurley's (2017) case study were afraid of their son getting hurt by the outside world, which led to their overparenting. On the other hand, Milly and Linda's parents in Imbesi's (1999) case studies were afraid of their child disliking them due to their current circumstances and feelings of guilt, which led to their indulgent parenting. Despite the differences in resulting parenting qualities in the two case studies done by Hurley (2017) and Imbesi (1999), both overparenting and overindulgence in the children led to the development of maladaptive narcissistic tendencies during the early years of the children's adolescence.

## 5. Determination of a Sensitive Period

Research on the development of narcissism in children has focused on parenting styles and environments. Only a number of studies include age as a potential factor that may be related to narcissistic tendencies in children, but the importance of the effects age may have on the development of maladaptive narcissism should not be disregarded. Findings in empirical research with regard to age and narcissism are crucial in understanding the foundations of maladaptive narcissistic tendencies in young adolescents.

In Huxley and Bizumic's (2017) study on the influence of parental invalidation and narcissism, Huxley and Bizumic found that age was significantly negatively correlated with both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism ( $r = -0.37$ ,  $r = -0.28$ , at  $p < 0.001$ )<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, based on the results of step 4 of the hierarchical regression analysis of age predicting vulnerable narcissism, Huxley and Bizumic found that age significantly predicted vulnerable narcissism, with greater age associated with lower vulnerable narcissism ( $b = -0.02$ , 95% CI = [-0.03, -0.01], SE < 0.01,  $t = -5.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ )<sup>3</sup>. Based on the results of step 4 of their hierarchical regression analysis of age predicting grandiose narcissism, Huxley and Bizumic found that age significantly predicted lower grandiose narcissism ( $b = -0.03$ , 95% CI = [-0.03, -0.02], SE < 0.01,  $t = -7.81$ ,  $p < 0.001$ )<sup>3</sup>. Huxley and Bizumic found a significant negative association between age and grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, which suggests that as an individual grows and matures, it is less likely for them to develop either grandiose or vulnerable narcissism. Additionally, with hierarchical regression analyses, Huxley and Bizumic found that age was a significant predictor of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, with increased age predicting lower levels of narcissism. The results from Huxley and Bizumic's study demonstrate that age is certainly a factor in the development of narcissism, with lower age predicting higher narcissism and higher age predicting lower narcissism.

In "Young Adult Narcissism: A 20-year Longitudinal Study of the Contribution of Parenting Styles, Preschool Precursors of Narcissism, and Denial," Cramer (2010) conducted a study with participants from Block and Block's Longitudinal Project (Block and Block, 1980) who were recruited at age three from nursery schools<sup>2</sup> and found that age 3/4 narcissism precursors were positively associated with willfulness at age 23,  $r = 0.38$ <sup>2</sup>. Additionally, Cramer found that age 3/4 narcissism precursors were negatively correlated with autonomy at age 23,  $r = -0.01$ <sup>2</sup>. Cramer found strong positive correlations between narcissism precursors in children ages 3 and 4 and willfulness, a factor of overt narcissism. Cramer also found a negative correlation between age 3/4 narcissism precursors and autonomy, a factor of healthy narcissism. The results suggest that although children may not have the psychological capacity to suffer from a narcissistic personality disorder, they could begin to present precursors of narcissism at three years old that can be identified and used as a predictor of the existence of narcissism in the future. However, relying on only correlations between age and maladaptive narcissism in children may curtail the discovery of other possible relationships and theories between age and narcissism, such as a sensitive period in which children are more susceptible to developing narcissistic tendencies when exposed to developmentally inappropriate parenting styles.

In a study on parental hostility and parental monitoring's effects on narcissism, Wetzel and Robins (2016) found that a cross-lagged effect between parental hostility at age 12 and exploitativeness at age 14 appeared consistently in models differentiating the two narcissism facets<sup>10</sup>. As for overall narcissism, Wetzel and Robins' finding held not only across maternal and paternal hostility but also across different informants on the BARS (child and spouse) as well as for the observational data. For example, for maternal hostility, the child-report BARS yielded a beta of 0.29, the parent-report BARS yielded a beta of 0.18, and the observational rating yielded a beta of 0.17<sup>10</sup>. Conversely, Wetzel and Robins found that parental hostility at age 14 did not significantly predict exploitativeness or overall narcissism at age 16<sup>10</sup>. Wetzel and Robins found that children at the age of 12 who experienced parental hostility were more likely to develop narcissistic tendencies than children who did not experience parental hostility; however, this finding was not for children who experienced parental hostility at the age of 14. The effects of parental hostility on narcissistic tendencies between 12 and 14 years old were different in the current study, but the range of those two ages is only two years. It is unlikely for such a drastic change in results for two extremely close age groups, which raises the question of how age may affect the impact that parental hostility has on the development of adaptive or maladaptive narcissism.

## 6. Development of Emotion Regulation Strategies

Because personality and emotion regulation strategies develop during early childhood, as age and maturity increases, the effects of parenting may not have as large of an impact on the development of narcissism in late childhood/young adulthood. The time in which children are developing crucial psychosocial skills, such as their personality and emotion regulation strategies, may also be the most impressionable period. Thus, when considering the impact of parenting styles on children developing adaptive or maladaptive narcissism, children in the earlier stages of adolescence could be the most affected by their parents' behavior in comparison to children in the later stages of adolescence.

In "Preschool is a Sensitive Period for the Influence of Maternal Support on the Trajectory of Hippocampal Development," Luby, Belden, Harms, Tillman, and Barch (2016) conducted a longitudinal study of 127 preschoolers who were assessed annually for behavioral and emotional development and observed caregiver support<sup>14</sup>. Luby et al. (2016) utilized Multilevel linear models (MLMs) to examine the effect of maternal support on participants' hippocampus volume over three waves of magnetic resonance brain imaging (MRI)<sup>14</sup>. Luby et al. claimed that the interaction between preschool maternal support and time was significantly positively associated with hippocampus volume ( $p = 0.0059$ )<sup>14</sup>. Luby et al. found that subjects with preschool maternal support 1 SD above the mean had a 2.06 times greater increase in total hippocampus volume across the three scans than those with 1 SD below the mean (2.70% vs. 1.31%)<sup>14</sup>. Luby et al. investigated individual-subject intercepts and slopes that were generated from the MLM of total hippocampus volume by preschool maternal support as potential predictors of the Children's Emotion Management Scale–Sadness (CEMS-S) dysregulation and coping subscales. Luby et al. found that individual-subject slopes were significantly associated with CEMS-S dysregulation and coping ( $B = -26.41$ ,  $SE = 12.53$ ,  $t = -2.11$ ,  $P = 0.0374$ )<sup>14</sup>. Luby et al.'s findings indicate that children who received a sufficient amount of maternal support during preschool had increased hippocampal volume when they were school-aged. Luby et al.'s findings also indicate that greater hippocampus volume was associated with more adaptive emotion regulation. The results from Luby et al.'s study suggest that insufficient maternal support may lead to decreased hippocampus volume, which, in turn, may be associated with maladaptive emotion regulation.

In "Associations between Narcissism and Emotion Regulation Difficulties: Respiratory Sinus Arrhythmia Reactivity as a Moderator," Zhang, Wang, You, Lü, and Luo (2015) examined the direct and interactive effects of overt and covert narcissism and respiratory sinus arrhythmia reactivity on emotion regulation difficulties in 227 undergraduate students<sup>15</sup>. Zhang et al. (2015) found that Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS) scores were positively associated with DERS scores ( $r = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that participants with higher levels of covert narcissism may report more experiences with emotion regulation difficulties<sup>15</sup>. Zhang et al. found that emotion regulation difficulties are positively associated with vulnerable narcissism. With Luby et al. (2016) findings, preschool may be a potential sensitive period where maternal support has the most impact on hippocampal growth, which is associated with the development of emotion regulation strategies. In turn, with Zhang et al.'s (2015) results, preschool may be a sensitive period where the amount of maternal support given to a child has the most impact on the child's vulnerability towards developing covert narcissism due to hippocampal growth and development of emotion regulation strategies.

In "Allostatic and Environmental Load in Toddlers Predicts Anxiety in Preschool and Kindergarten," Buss, Davis, and Kiel (2011) examined relations between load indices and maladjustment, concurrently and at multiple times in on group of 111 participants between ages 2 and 5 (Study 1) and a group of 125 highly fearful toddlers from 2 to 3 years

of age (Study 2)<sup>16</sup>. In Study 1, Buss et al. (2011) found that environmental load, which included maternal and paternal negative affect and inhibition and maternal overprotectiveness, critical control, appropriate support, and negative expressivity, was positively correlated with ages 2, 3, and 5 internalizing problems at  $r = 0.15$ ,  $r = 0.18$ , and  $r = 0.31$  respectively<sup>16</sup>. Buss et al. also found that environmental load was positively correlated with ages 2, 3, 4, and 5 externalizing problems at  $r = 0.24$ ,  $r = 0.25$ ,  $r = 0.19$ , and  $r = 0.17$ <sup>16</sup>. Internalizing problems and externalizing problems are often present in patients with narcissism. Buss et al.'s findings indicate that at the young ages of two, three, and five, children may begin to develop internalizing and externalizing issues due to parental behavior. Thus, it is plausible that narcissistic tendencies may be present in children ages two to five due to their environmental load or indirectly due to environmental load with internalizing and externalizing problems as either a precursor or an effect of narcissism, as shown in *figure 1*.

In the second study, Buss et al. found that environmental load was positively associated with age two general anxiety and age three general anxiety ( $r = 0.22$ ,  $r = 0.28$ )<sup>16</sup>. Similar to Buss et al., in "Development and Validation of the Praise, Indulgence, and Status Parenting Scale," Thomassin, Wilson, Vaughn-Coaxum, Campbell, Zeichner, and Miller (2019) designed a study with 464 participants ages 18-37 to develop and validate a parenting scale to measure parenting practices consisting of praise, indulgence, and encouragement of children to pursue extrinsic, status-oriented goals<sup>17</sup>. Thomassin et al. (2019) found that maternal and paternal indulgence was positively correlated with greater anxiety in children, at  $r = 0.36$  and  $r = 0.36$ <sup>17</sup>. Therefore, parental behaviors, such as negative affect, inhibition, overprotectiveness, negative expressivity, and indulgence, may be a direct or indirect factor in the presence of anxiety in children. Segrin et al. (2013) found that child reported anxiety was positively correlated to narcissism at  $r = 0.44$  with  $p < 0.001$ <sup>13</sup>. Segrin et al.'s findings suggest that there may be a relationship between parental behavior and narcissistic tendencies during the early years of adolescence with child anxiety as a mediator, as shown in *figure 1*.

Hurley (2017) contended that the narcissistic tendencies Mark presented served as a defense mechanism against his fears and anxieties that were associated with the start of school, where he would be separated from his mother<sup>11</sup>. Hurley stated that Mark's narcissistic tendencies were a defense mechanism for the anxiety and fear that he felt. Hurley's observations from Mark's case further indicates that anxiety is associated with maladaptive narcissistic tendencies seen in children. However, Hurley suggests that anxiety served as a defense mechanism rather than a mediator for parental behaviors. Buss et al. (2011) study on environmental load's impact on internalizing and externalizing problems and anxiety and Hurley's (2017) case study with Mark both encompass the age range of two to 5 years old. The consistency in results between these two studies along with the findings from Luby et al.'s (2016) findings on preschool-aged children suggest that the sensitive period in which parenting behaviors have the most impact on children's susceptibility in developing maladaptive narcissism may be around the ages of two to five years because that is also the age range in which young children are developing critical psychosocial skills, such as emotion regulation strategies.

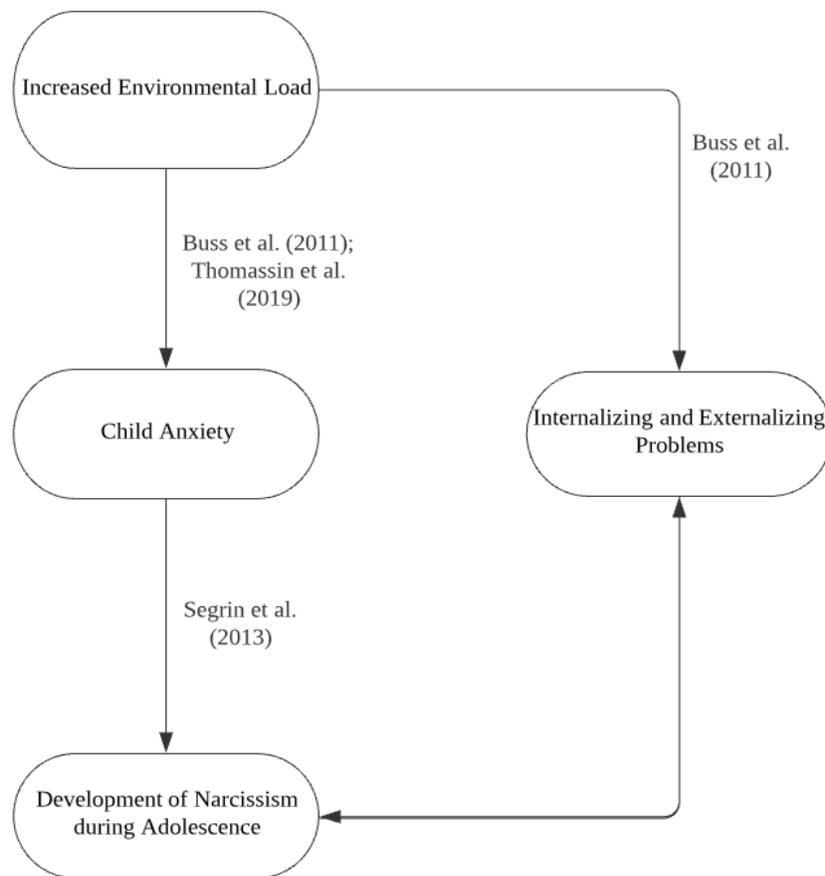


Figure 1. Structural model of the indirect and direct effect of increased environmental load on child narcissism. Indirect effects of environmental load on narcissism include anxiety or internalizing and externalizing problems as mediators.

## 7. Discussion

Convincing empirical evidence has solidified the understanding of how parenting styles may lead to children developing narcissism during early childhood. Recent research suggested that parenting styles may occur concurrently, which can also increase the strength of the association between developmentally inappropriate parenting styles on the development of narcissism. Additionally, developmentally inappropriate parenting styles may be related to feelings of stress and anxiety in parents because of their desire to protect and love their children to the best of their ability.

Very little research has been conducted regarding the effects age may have on narcissism. Despite the lack of empirical data, some consistent trends can still be seen, such as the negative association between age and grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. It appears that when age increases, the effects parenting styles may have on the development of narcissism decreases. Recent research on psychological disorders related to narcissism, such as internalization and externalization problems and anxiety, and the development of emotion regulation strategies suggest that earlier years of childhood may be the period where children are more likely to develop maladaptive traits as a result of environmental stimuli that is developmentally inappropriate.

However, the analyzed data is from such a small pool of research, which may lower the accuracy of the proposed hypotheses. Thus, future empirical research should be done with an adequate number of participants, control groups, and valid measures of data in order to determine if a sensitive period exists in which developmentally inappropriate parenting behaviors have the most influence on children developing maladaptive narcissism.

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