The Narcissistic Parent

When you think about it, steering a child through the narcissistic reefs of the separation-individuation process is one tough job. Optimally, you have to look beyond the egocentrism, the mood swings, the temper tantrums, and the defiance to the person who is struggling with a very important developmental task, the formation of a healthy, autonomous Self. The job requires an adult who is patient, compassionate, and clear on boundaries. To do the job well, parents and caregivers need to have a realistic sense both of themselves and of the child, to be able to control their own aggressive impulses, and, most of all, to not use the child to meet their own needs. In short, they must have successfully completed their own separation-individuation process. But what if they haven’t?
The Narcissistic Mother

Given that the overtone of life is widely heard to be a duet between mother and child— with the father in a significant yet nevertheless supporting role—the professional literature has devoted far more attention to narcissistic mothers of young children than to their fathers. Among experts who believe that most of a child’s later problems stem from mishaps during the years when a separate Self is being formed, the mother is seen as the one who wields the most power and therefore has the most responsibility. But the crucial person in these formative years, the one who will have the most impact on early psychological development, is really the preferred caretaker with whom the child forms a symbiotic attachment. In today’s world, that person might alternatively be a father, a same-sex partner of the biological or adoptive parent, another relative such as a grandparent, a nanny, or someone at the daycare center who tends to a very young child for most of its waking hours. Mothers cannot claim this role by title alone.

That said, it is important to note that when the caretaking mother is a Narcissist, the very process of symbiosis is threatened because of a failure to bond in the normal way. This is a mother who is incapable of forming a healthy attachment to her child, even when she desperately wants to. She can’t help but be drawn to motherhood for narcissistic reasons—an idealized vision of herself as a nurturer, perhaps, or a desire to “complete” herself by carrying in her body, bearing, and sucking a child. Images of herself in this archetypal female role ignite her grandiosity and magnify her feelings of entitlement. Even before conception, the fantasized child is an extension of her, someone who can be used to make her feel special and inspire others to admire her.

The narcissistic mother requires, of course, a “perfect” child to mirror her perfection as a giver and nurturer of life. If the real child disappoints in some way—by appearance, or sex, or some other flaw—she herself will feel defective, triggering shame and rage. But by projecting another, more pleasing image onto her child, one that promises to pump her up, she can hide her ugly feelings and preserve the admiration of others. Whether she perceives her child as “perfect” or is secretly disappointed, the narcissistic mother does not bond so much with the real infant as with the fantasy child of her dreams.

Signs of a mother’s narcissism are evident before the child is born in women who may be excessively preoccupied with their own appearance and comfort during pregnancy, who expect others to cater to them, who are unusually distressed with the changes in their bodies, or who are extremely fearful of labor and delivery. Some may be obsessed with having the perfect pregnancy or becoming a perfect mother. In other cases, a narcissistic mother-to-be may be too absorbed in her own life to seek adequate prenatal care or may engage in practices or activities, such as drug or alcohol use or other risky behavior, that endanger the fetus. She may show little interest in preparing for the arrival of her child, or conversely, she may be obsessed with having “the best of everything,” regardless of her financial circumstances. She may have excessive expectations in regard to gifts from relatives and friends or be more interested in decorating the nursery or assembling the layette than in actually welcoming a child into her life. The narcissistic mother-to-be may be either detached from or overly invested in aspects of her pregnancy, but in either case, she is preoccupied with her own experience rather than focused on the infant who will soon emerge from her body.

After her child arrives, the narcissistic mother may become depressed as the crushing demands of a newborn leave little opportunity for her to satisfy her grandiose fantasies. The selflessness required of her at this stage of motherhood may be more than she can bear, and she may look for ways out. She may not hesitate to take advantage of someone else’s offer to shoulder some or all of the burden, and if she had a career or a job that she enjoyed, she may be desperate to return sooner than she had originally planned. If there is no way to escape, she may go through the motions with indifference or carelessness, unless others are watching. In these difficult early months when the child has little to offer her that feeds her narciss-
sism, she may be neglectful, overly anxious, or very emotionally detached and mechanical, as if the baby were a doll. Her experience of motherhood may be reflected in comments that attribute unrealistic meanings to her baby’s behavior, such as, “He just cries like that to make me mad!”

By the time, a few months later, when their babies are ready to engage in a symbiotic relationship, some narcissistic mothers have already found someone else to take over as primary caregiver. Those who have hung in, however, may be pleased by what is about to happen. Rewarded for their efforts by “the preferential smile,” they get to feel special again, at least for a while. Since the narcissistic mother does not recognize boundaries between herself and others anyway and actually prefers to have them mesh with her, she’s a natural for the symbiotic phase. Her baby will gaze at her lovingly, study her every move and expression, take comfort only from her touch and her voice, and she will respond in kind. No one, perhaps, has ever made her feel so important, so special. No one has ever belonged to her so completely, not since . . . ever so long ago. Deep within her a chord is struck, evoking a time of rapture from her own infancy. She may become so absorbed in this child who is now psychologically merged with her that she may be unable to attend to anyone else during this time.

Alas, however, her child will soon betray their blissful union. He is destined to outgrow it, to seek his fortunes in the world beyond their private paradise. As she watches him begin to respond to others and pay attention to things that are of little interest to her, she may become resentful or fearful of losing him. She may try to restrict his opportunities for autonomy or control him through excessive shaming. She may also begin to manipulate him by rewarding behavior that resonates with her own selfish expectations, pumping up the child’s natural grandiosity during this period and making it difficult for him to develop a more realistic self-concept.

Remember Emily, the two-year-old girl in the last chapter who woke up to find a visitor in her home? Her mother’s attuned responses to some of the challenges of the last phase of separation-individuation were a model of empathic parenting. The same scenario in the hands of a narcissistic mother would have a completely different feel. Such a mother might allow her child to command the spotlight for her egotism, thus reinforcing the child’s grandiosity while at the same time seeming, in a theatrical display before the guest, to demonstrate Mom’s magnanimous parenting. What Mom might portray as attentive mothering, however, in this instance would be no more than an exercise in her own grandiosity.

Another flavor of narcissistic Mom might be annoyed and unable to contain her irritation at having a rare adult conversation interrupted by her awakening child. She might ignore the child until her cries became too intrusive or attempt to rush her daughter into some activity perceived as less bothersome to Mother. This, most likely, would fail at this age. The child’s attempts to capture this mother’s attention would probably evoke an angry, shaming response peppered with demands for more mature behavior. Power struggles would ensue, with the angry child demonstrating her ability to seriously disrupt an otherwise pleasant afternoon. One narcissistic mother would fail to consider the child’s real needs and instead use her to inflate her own narcissistic balloon, while the other would socialize with a heavy hand and no accommodation to her child’s age-appropriate needs and behavior.

The practicing and rapprochement phases of ages ten to thirty months are the point at which a narcissistic mother who has formed an earlier symbiotic bond with her child has the power to amplify her child’s narcissism, creating a future Narcissist. If she rewards the child’s natural grandiosity and omnipotence because it pleases her, if she fails to urge him gently into a more realistic self-image, the separation-individuation process stops. Instead of helping him see himself more realistically, she encourages him to depend for self-esteem on a fantasy version of himself as special and powerful, just as she does. He remains stuck in the narcissistic position, an extension of his mother just as she is of him.
Since the narcissistic mother has no tolerance for shame, she is unable to weather the necessary storms of the separation-individuation process, when children's behavior often causes parents considerable chagrin. When he defies her will or embarrasses her publicly, she overreacts with rage and blame. She shares her child's inability to neutralize shame, so she can't help him over this developmental hurdle either. Empathy and the ability to control aggression are never modeled by the mother or mastered by the child, who remains acutely sensitive to Mother's hostility. The child who is least able to manage shame, develop compassion, or contain aggression is the one most likely to become a Narcissist. Like mother, like child.

The Narcissistic Father

Due to her traditional role as the primary caregiver in early childhood, it is the direct impact of a mother's narcissism on her child's sense of Self that is usually most significant. But under circumstances when the child forms the symbiotic attachment to a father—when Father is the primary caretaker—his narcissism would be no less an obstacle to healthy development than a mother's, and for the same reasons.

Even in traditional households, however, a father's narcissism may indirectly influence a child in the first two years, depending on how he treats the child's mother. Mothers of young children are drained both physically and emotionally by their children's needs, and a supportive partner is an essential source of replenishment. When Father is too self-absorbed to nurture Mother, she may turn to her child to meet her own emotional needs, which may make her so "close" to the child that separation-individuation will be compromised. Children with narcissistic fathers and clinging mothers often remain bound to their mothers in unhealthy ways throughout their lives.

By the time the child reaches the last leg in her journey to selfhood, she, too, needs her father's help to complete the process of psychological separation from Mother. It is Father who represents the exciting world outside the tangled mass of Self and Mother that remains from symbiosis, but if he is uninterested in his child or otherwise unavailable, a vital bridge to autonomy is lost. Not all narcissistic fathers are remote and uninvolved, however. Some will take the child's growing interest in them as an opportunity to feed their own needs for power or admiration.

The narcissistic father typically approaches parenthood from one of two very different perspectives, but they have in common that they are both about "Me." On the one hand, he may have had no intention of becoming a father in the first place and may feel tricked, trapped, or otherwise manipulated into parenthood by the female who is carrying his child. As her body loses its familiar form, he may feel revulsion toward her. If she becomes less physically and emotionally able to satisfy his appetites, he may struggle with feelings of rejection, betrayed entitlement, and envy of the fetus. The shame beneath these feelings may be dumped onto her and her body in the form of critical remarks or sadistic jokes that express his rage. In extreme cases, he may even become physically aggressive toward her.

Just as narcissistic is the man who looks forward to fatherhood as a means of controlling his partner or replicating himself. This man's grandiose fantasies are fixed on a future in which his sphere of influence, and hence his importance, are expanded through the exploitation of those who, because of their dependence on him, can be dominated and molded to suit his needs. He may idealize his partner or treat her with indifference, but he seizes on fatherhood as a means to keep himself pumped up for a long, long time.

The narcissistic father may be abandoning from the outset, preoccupied with selfish pursuits and stingy with his time and personal resources. He may not adequately prepare for the financial responsibilities of becoming a father and express resentment about having to provide for a child. He may show little interest in the health and welfare of his child's mother and interact with her primarily to meet his own needs. He is "too busy" to attend prenatal classes or to be present
at the time of birth, and he may abdicate most or all of the responsibilities of parenthood and feel that those who would like him to do otherwise are just trying to cramp his style. This is a man who sees diaper changing and 3:00 A.M. feedings as not part of his job description. Anything he chooses to give should be enough, and he is entitled to carry on his life without accommodation to his new role as a father. If the mother of his child is less available to meet his sexual and emotional needs, he feels justified in seeking satisfaction elsewhere. He may check in with the child every once in a while to see if there’s anything there for him, but he seldom finds enough to sustain his interest.

The more controlling narcissistic father, on the other hand—the one who wants to use fatherhood to pump himself up—is anything but abandoning. He may hover over the mother and child, looking for ways to become a focal part of the action. His hypervigilance is a sign that he is feeling anxious, and what he is anxious about is that the mother-child bond has little to do with him. If he was possessive and demanding before the birth, he most certainly now feels excluded. She is attending to the baby and not to him, so instead of getting more, he’s getting less. He may sufl or become even more demanding in an attempt to compete with his child. He may also compete with his partner by trying to lure the child away from her with toys or activities. Often, these are beyond the child’s developmental level, revealing his lack of empathy and awareness of his child’s actual capabilities. He may have other unrealistic expectations as well that are revealed in such remarks as, “Why doesn’t she look happy to see me when I come home?”

Fathers are important to their children from birth and, if closely involved in their daily care, can connect with them, in their own masculine way, as intimately as mothers do. However, in terms of the development of a separate sense of Self, there is only one symbiotic relationship, and it is usually with Mother. While Father may feel a bit like an outsider for a few months, he does have a part to play in the separation-individuation process, and it’s no less important than Mother’s. Symbiosis, like childhood narcissism, is supposed to be a transitional phase, and Father’s role, when the time is right, is to show his child the world beyond her private paradise with Mother. When the child is psychologically ready, there is a new lure to adventure, driven not by infantile fantasies of grandiosity and omnipotence, but by the very real prospect of mastery. The child at this phase is growing more capable by the day and ready to loosen the moorings from the Mother ship. It is Father who invites her to explore the water, and together with Mother, guides her until she can swim on her own.

Unfortunately, this process is sabotaged when Father is a Narcissist. As the child in the earliest phases of separation-individuation becomes very responsive to his stimulating interactions, the narcissistic father gets a taste of what symbiosis was like for Mother. Suddenly, he has a chance to be the child’s “favorite,” and he may become very possessive and compete with Mother in order to pump himself up. If Father continues in this vein, however, the power struggles of the twos and threes will be all the more dramatic, and the child will have great difficulty bringing her infantile grandiosity in line with reality. But as long as she resonates with his fantasies, the narcissistic father doesn’t care. He may so revel in his child’s budding efforts at autonomy as she shows more opposition toward Mother that he may fail to set limits and be reluctant to discipline her, unless her egocentrism clashes with his own. At these times, he may become excessively demanding, controlling, or critical and overly shaming of “bad behavior.” And when he treats his child this way, he thinks he is exercising his paternal prerogative.

It is important to note that all parents of young children feel at times depleted, exasperated, overwhelmed, and perplexed by the considerable demands of parenting. They have feelings toward their children that they are ashamed of, and they do things they regret. This does not make them Narcissists. There are no perfect parents, and to think
there are is itself a narcissistic concept. There are narcissistic parents, however, and they are the ones who cannot empathize with their children, or consistently attend or respond to their children’s real needs because of preoccupations with their own. There is a pervasive quality of grandiosity and entitlement that infuses such parents’ behavior, and an overriding denial of reality that arises from their own needs for perfection, to idealize and be idealized by their offspring. They impose unrealistic expectations, and they are flexible only when it suits them. Their message is, “If I will it, it should be so.”

The real cutting edge of parenting—especially with young children—is on the fine blade of knowing how and when to accept developmentally appropriate behavior that would be unacceptable in older children while also helping a child move forward at his or her own pace. To err on one side is to stunt the child’s psychological separation and individuation, while to err on the other is to encourage the development of a false Self.

The “Pseudomature” Child

The “pseudomature” child is the one who seems to have skipped right over childhood. If you could travel back in time to observe such individuals from about the age of two or three, you might see a “little man” or a “little mother” who, accommodating to a parent’s narcissistic proclivities, essentially raised him- or herself while trying to meet nearly impossible parental demands.

Researchers have shown that mothers of such children discourage them from “acting like a baby” and push them to behave more like a “grown-up,” even in early childhood. They want words instead of physical contact and dislike it when their children act out anger. The kids are not supposed to make Mother feel bad if she has to leave them in someone else’s care, nor are they supposed to feel—let alone express—the rage, humiliation, and powerlessness that are normal in young childhood.

Not surprisingly, children who have been given these messages and have not been helped to develop skills for managing their shame, rage, and aggression turn out to be very appealing to adults on the one hand, but on the other, they’re more emotionally fragile than they initially appear. Their craving for admiration makes them clever at capturing the spotlight, but they need to be “the best,” in command, winners of any competition. They are precociously self-sufficient and adept at avoiding frustration, but when they can’t they fall apart, screaming, sobbing, even lashing out aggressively. They hate being helped by anyone, especially other kids, whom they tend to dominate. They are far too charming to be called “spoiled brats,” but they have considerable unresolved infantile narcissism, and they desperately need to be in control to maintain their self-esteem.

Both the “pseudomature” child and the “entitlement monster” are products of narcissistic parenting. The latter is held captive in a parent’s narcissistic bubble, while the former is forced out prematurely and forms a false Self that appears more competent than it actually is. Both fail to separate from their emotionally bankrupt mothers, and they become what Mother, or Father, needs them to be rather than who they truly are. Their fragile self-esteem depends on the validation of others, but they also fear dependency and intimacy, which threaten to expose their weakness and intolerable shame. They strive to be recognized as superior and may envy those who have what they do not. While they may be superficially charming, they often have a deep cold streak or a powerful hunger that comes from never having known empathic love. Those who are least able to tolerate shame and who have had their infantile grandiosity and omnipotence amplified will become Narcissists, while a larger group remain shame-driven, curiously drawn to those who resemble a narcissistic parent, and confused about what’s real and what isn’t. It is this group that are most in need of the survival strategies outlined in Part III, Defending Your Self.