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Perils and Prospects of Parenting LDS Youth in an Increasingly *Narcissistic Culture*

American culture is marked by a growing desire for special status, recognition, and achievement (Reber & Moody, 2013). As one manifestation of this trend, consider the increasing number of people seeking the spotlight of fame through the medium of reality television programs. In 2000 there were only four reality television programs on air. One decade later, there were 320, each one with a cast of supposedly everyday people like you and me trying to become famous and often doing so in the most outrageous ways (Ocasio, 2012). An even greater number of people are seeking the recognition of their so-called friends and followers through social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter. In 2011 there were over 800 million active Facebook users, and every day two billion posts received “likes” and comments and 250 million photos were posted. At the time, the average US Facebook user spent 7 hours and 46 minutes on Facebook each month (Parr, 2011).

Researchers at UCLA’s Children Digital Media Center (CDMC) have found that the media is participating in these social trends, especially in television programming directed toward preteens. Uhls & Greenfield (2011), for example, said that for the last 26 years that values in preteen television

have been measured: the top values were community feeling and benevolence, with fame ranked among the least important. In 2007, for the first time ever, the trend flipped, with fame at the top and community feeling and benevolence dropping nearly to the bottom. One of the study coauthors found this trend disconcerting, stating that “the rise of fame in preteen television may be one influence on the documented rise in narcissism in our culture” (CDMC@UCLA, 2011).

Some psychologists disagree with the suggestion that these trends toward fame lead to narcissism. They assert that the rising concern with fame is harmless or nothing new and argue that the youth of every generation have behaved similarly before growing up and growing out of this life phase (for example, Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010). However, these psychologists are in the minority. A growing number of mental health professionals are concerned that our culture is becoming more self-absorbed, self-indulgent, and narcissistic than any previous generation (Cushman, 1995; Richardson, 2005; Pinsky & Young, 2009). Psychologists Twenge & Campbell (2009) believe we live in an unprecedented age of entitlement that is contributing to a narcissism epidemic, afflicting many more people than ever before. Support for their argument can be found in a number of studies. Among these studies are those identifying a strong relationship between participation on reality television programs and narcissism (Young & Pinsky, 2006), and studies that have found evidence of a strong positive correlation between Facebook use and subclinical levels of narcissism (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008).

A number of researchers agree that adolescents are at a particularly high risk for developing the characteristics of narcissism that mark this rising social tide (Barry, Kerig, Stellwagen, & Barry, 2010). They note that measures of adolescent and young adult narcissism have steadily risen since the 1970s, and more young people are receiving diagnoses of Narcissistic Personality Disorder than in the past. These trends led psychologist W. Keith Campbell (2011) to conclude, “You can look at individual scores of narcissism, you can look at data on lifetime prevalence of Narcissistic Personality

Disorder, you can look at related cultural trends, and they all point to one thing. Narcissism is on the rise” (p. 64).

This rise in narcissism is disconcerting because narcissism has a number of negative effects on psychological well-being and the quality of interpersonal relationships. It also contributes to a number of problems in society (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). With regard to psychological well-being, researchers have found that narcissism correlates with increased aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) and hostility (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995) and is linked to extreme emotional instability and strong outbursts, which include anger and rage (Emmons, 1987). These psychological effects not only negatively impact the individual, but can be distressing to others. Psychologists Brown and Zeigler-Hill (2004) noted that “narcissists often go to great lengths to glorify themselves even when doing so undermines their relationships with others” (p. 585). Narcissists often demand that their concerns be the focal point of relationships, and they show little concern for the needs of others. As one psychologist put it, “Narcissists have a lack of insight about understanding and processing feelings [and] . . . are slow to learn the all-important skills of commitment such as sympathy, understanding the intentions and motives of their partner, compassion and empathy” (Namka, 2005, “Intimacy Skill Defects,” para. 1). This insensitivity to the feelings of others often damages relational well-being and may hasten the termination of relationships (Miller, Campbell, & Pilkonis, 2007).

Narcissism also negatively impacts society. Namka (2005) notes that “people with narcissistic behavior have a sense of entitlement that allows them to break the rules of society” (“Narcissistic Person in Relationship,” para. 4). In this sense, it is not surprising that researchers have found a strong positive correlation between narcissism and white-collar business crime (Blickel, Schlegel, Fassbender, & Klein, 2006). Narcissistic people are less likely to feel guilt than non-narcissistic people, which can loosen the restraints on immoral behavior (Brunell, Staats, Barden, & Hupp, 2011) and contribute to the deterioration of societal morals and values. Given the troubling individual, interpersonal, and societal consequences that can

accompany narcissism, a number of social scientists have begun to look more closely at the factors that may contribute to the development of narcissistic tendencies in adolescents, including the media, technology, and the topic of this chapter: parenting.

Narcissism and Parental Indulgence

A relationship between parenting and narcissism has been presupposed since at least the time of Freud (1914). However, the systematic empirical study of the specific aspects of parenting that might contribute to adolescent narcissism has a fairly short history. While more study is needed, the contours of the relationship between parenting and adolescent narcissism are beginning to come into relief. Researchers have found that parenting styles, specifically the authoritarian and permissive forms, may play an important role in the development of adolescent narcissism (Watson, Little, & Biderman, 1992), as can such things as excessive parental control and monitoring. Mixed messages of public praise and private belittling from parents may also contribute to this disconcerting social trend (Horton, Bleau, & Drwecki, 2006).

One factor that has shown a particularly sustained and strong correlation across multiple studies and among both adolescent males and females is parental indulgence. According to Horton (2011), “parents who indulge their children by caving into their every whim and lavishing them with affection regardless of their behavior are facilitating their children’s sense of superiority and entitlement, critical ingredients in narcissism.” The key concern with indulgent parenting is that children learn via their parents’ modeling that there is “a disconnect between self-evaluation and performance such that the positive view of the self exists independent of behavior (that is, ‘I am great no matter what I do’)” (p. 129).

Parental indulgence is a particularly paradoxical phenomenon. Parents want to show their children their support and encouragement. They want to strengthen their children’s self-concepts and raise their self-esteem, and they certainly do not want to curtail their potential. However, these



Parents who indulge their children by caving into their every whim and lavishing them with affection regardless of their behavior are facilitating their children's sense of superiority and entitlement, which are critical ingredients in narcissism. © Andres Rodriguez.

healthy parental intentions can easily turn into something more troubling. As Twenge and Campbell (2009) described it, “It is increasingly common to see parents relinquishing authority to young children, showering them with unearned praise, protecting them from their teachers’ criticisms, giving them expensive automobiles, and allowing them to have freedom but not the responsibility that goes with it” (p. 73). In cases such as this, when parents give their children praise that is not connected to performance and block or dismiss negative or critical feedback of their children that comes from others (for example, a coach or a teacher), they may overinflate the confidence of their children and contribute to their sense of self-importance and superiority (Reber & Moody, 2013).

These tendencies to indulge children only increase when parents’ own sense of worth and self-esteem are tied up in their children. It was Freud (1917) who first described an unconscious defense mechanism—that is, a method of protecting oneself from feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment—known as identification, which can manifest itself in the tendency

for some parents to live vicariously through the successes and accomplishments of their children. If their child excels academically, athletically, musically, or in some other way that speaks to the repressed unmet wishes of the parents, the parents may unconsciously take much of the credit for their child's excellence and feel better about themselves as a result. This can fuel parents' overinvestment in their child's activities and accomplishments. Narcissistic identification can also drive parents to push their children into activities that the parents, not the children, care about and can facilitate the behavior of giving praise without critical feedback that marks problematic parental indulgence. After all, if the parent identifies with their child, any negative or critical feedback the child receives will also be taken personally by the parent whose own self-worth may be too fragile to tolerate any criticism or failure.

Are Parents to Blame?

It can be easy to point the finger at parents and blame them for the behaviors and personalities of their children. After all, they are typically the people who spend every day with the children, and they are responsible for teaching them and helping them mature into fully functioning persons. Of all the factors that play a role in a child's life, it is the parents who are most easily seen and are most likely to receive the credit or blame for the child's actions. But there are many other influences at play here, the majority of which are implicit and go unnoticed, both by parents and by those who might blame them. Indeed, we would argue that parents are in a uniquely difficult position. Parents, along with their children, are caught in the middle of a virtual perfect storm of implicit sociocultural and psychological forces that press parents toward indulgence and encourage a sense of entitlement and superiority in their children; and many parents are completely unaware of these forces and pressures acting on them and their children.

We are not suggesting that parents or children are determined by these factors. However, to the extent they are unaware of them it is easier for

certain sociocultural and psychological ideas and practices about parenting to be taken for granted as the way things are or the way things are supposed to be. Without recognition that these commonly accepted sociocultural influences and ideas are assumptions, not facts, and without consideration of viable alternative ways to conceptualize parenting, parents may be unlikely to engage in the important critical thinking process that would help them see the role these assumptions play in their children developing a heightened sense of specialness or even narcissistic tendencies.

Implicit Sociocultural Influences on Parental Indulgence

To facilitate greater critical thinking about parental indulgence and the sociocultural influences acting upon it, we make explicit here several of the implicit assumptions that influence parents and press their children toward a heightened sense of self-importance and entitlement. Over time these assumptions have likely become taken for granted by many parents, as they seem to have been by many mental health professionals and our society generally. We critically examine these ideas to show their status as assumptions, not facts, and then we briefly consider an alternative set of assumptions that are based on the gospel of Jesus Christ and provide a contrast to the taken-for-granted assumptions of the conventional view. This critical evaluation of assumptions and alternatives is designed to provide parents with a model for conducting their own critical examination of their assumptions about parenting and may help parents make a more informed decision about their parenting practices.

Humanistic psychology and self-centeredness. In the 1950s and '60s Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and other psychologists in the humanistic tradition grew dissatisfied with the deterministic and negative psychologies of psychoanalysis and behaviorism. They sought to emphasize the positive potential in persons to become fully functioning, flourishing human beings and developed a number of important theories to that effect. The result was a psychological movement with sufficient impact to become known as the

third force in psychology (Goble, 1970). This third force emphasized the unique, inherent potential of every individual which can be actualized only if the individual is allowed to discover his or her potential and develop it without the forced societal expectations of parents and other institutions.

Carl Rogers (1961), for example, believed that if children are given unconditional positive regard by their parents and other significant people in their life, then the inner voice of their authentic self—their genuine potential—will not be drowned out by outer voices of parental expectation or societal demands. Parents who show conditional positive regard, on the other hand, will press children to live for the sake of others instead of for the sake of their own potential. As children conform to parental and societal expectations, they will develop incongruence between the authentic self and this socially developed self, the result of which is inauthenticity, which will ultimately bring about some kind of disorder in the person. For Rogers, in order to raise fully functioning persons, parents must let children be their genuine selves, showing positive regard for the child without limitation or condition. Otherwise, as the humanist sees it, children will develop neurotic or psychotic conditions that may stay with them their entire life and will hinder their self-actualization.

Humanistic psychology's conceptualization of self-actualization has been criticized for its potential for self-centeredness (Myers, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The heart of the criticism is that if the self-actualization needs of the individual are primary, then the needs of others must inevitably be secondary (Slife & Williams, 1995). This strongly suggests that parents must set aside their expectations for their children and cater to the needs of their children as their children define those needs and endeavor to pursue them. In this way, parents and other people are instrumentalized and serve as the means to their children's ends, which can promote a sense of entitlement in children and may encourage indulgence by parents (Cushman, 1990; Vitz 1994).

Postmodernism and moral and epistemological relativism. A number of historians and philosophers describe contemporary western culture as

postmodern (for example, Best & Kellner, 1997). Postmodernism has many themes and meanings, but one prominent focus of this perspective is the critique of absolute truth and morality (Franks & Keller, 1996). For many postmodernists there are no capital “T” truths that transcend all cultures and times. Grand, all-encompassing, authoritative narratives like religion, science, and democracy are not taken to be universal and certain. Instead all truth and morality claims are viewed as particular and tentative. For the relativistic postmodern, all truth is culturally constructed within each culture’s unique context (Burr, 1995). This means the things we think of as capital “T” truths are only culture-bound little “t” truths that have application and value only within the culture in which they are constructed.

If every culture constructs its truths according to its particular context, history, and goals one culture cannot say another culture is wrong or immoral because it would be judging that culture according to its standards of truth and morality, which are only true for that unique culture. To impose one culture’s truths on the truths of another culture is intolerant. Tolerance is probably the closest thing to a universal truth or moral value in a relativistic postmodern society (Wong, 1984). From the postmodern perspective, when cultures tolerate one another they honor and preserve the different truths of other cultures (Carson, 2012).

There is no principle reason why relativism would not seep very easily down to the individual level. Indeed, a number of postmodern thinkers assert that truth is ultimately in the eye of the beholder (Christman, 2009). After all, just as cultures emerge in unique sociocultural historical contexts, so too do individuals. No one has the same genetic makeup, environment, experiences, contexts, and so forth, as any other person, so how can anyone really know what it is like to be another person? How can anyone know another person’s truths? From this perspective, even parents don’t fully know the unique contexts of their children. Therefore parents should tolerate their children’s burgeoning truths rather than impose their own truths upon them. Anything short of that would be intolerant and overbearing. Children may have always complained that their parents don’t know what it

is like to be them and to live in their time and place, but now, with the support of the postmodern worldview, kids can back up their complaints with a culturally reinforced ideology. If parents are to steer clear of imposing their truths on their children, which would be a sure sign of intolerance for the postmodern, they must let their children ultimately decide what is true and good for themselves.

Moral and epistemological relativism is seen by many scholars as a significant threat to the health of society, and for this reason postmodernism has been widely criticized for its potentially destructive influence (see Fisher, 2005; Baumann, 1992). Relativism denies any claim to authority over others by any culture or person, including parents. This means that every person, including a child, is ultimately an authority unto himself or herself, and that individual authority must be tolerated. Within this framework, parents may offer suggestions or advice to their children, but they cannot impose their will on them and certainly cannot with any justification tell their children no.

American psychology and self-esteem. The term “self-esteem” is an invention of American psychology first described by William James (1890) just over a century ago. Since that time it has grown in popularity and has become reified as one of the attributes or characteristics of children that is of great concern to parents and educators (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). There are now literally thousands of manuals and handbooks that teach parents and teachers how to enhance and monitor children’s self-esteem and how to identify signs of trouble when it is low. Research on self-esteem development suggests that childhood and adolescence are key stages of self-esteem formation and parents play a very important role in that formation (Shaffer, 2005). Many parents feel responsible for helping children cultivate high positive evaluations of themselves and for watching out for warning signs of low self-esteem, including depression and loneliness.

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Many parents feel responsible for helping children cultivate high, positive evaluations of themselves and for watching out for warning signs of low self-esteem, including depression and loneliness. Matt Reier, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

children will be in a position to enjoy many lifelong benefits, including greater confidence, greater capacity for happiness, more friends, stronger values, greater enjoyment of activities, increased resilience, resistance to manipulation and peer pressure, and many more (Baumeister & Bushman, 2008; Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, Vohs, 2003). And how are parents taught to cultivate high self-esteem in their children? The self-esteem literature encourages parents to practice unconditional positive regard, indulgence, and tolerance. Twenge and Campbell (2009) warn about the negative consequences that often follow from these messages, stating:



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Many of today's parents . . . seek to raise children high in self-admiration and self-esteem, partially because books and articles have touted its importance. Unfortunately, much of what parents think raises self-esteem—such as telling a kid he's special and giving him what he wants—actually leads to narcissism. (p. 74)

It is important to note that high self-esteem need not be connected to the reality of a person's circumstances or performance in any way. In fact, researchers have found that people with high self-esteem often tend to be unrealistically optimistic (Armor & Taylor, 2002). For example, when asked about the likelihood of divorce or suffering from a terminal illness or a catastrophic event at some point in their lives, people with high self-esteem significantly underestimate the probability that such things would ever happen to them. Researchers have also found that people with high self-esteem will sometimes handicap their performance on a task in order to preserve their positive self-evaluations (Tice & Baumeister, 1990).

Because high self-esteem does not have to correlate positively with ability, performance, or skill, then criticism, punishment, negative feedback, or even realistic feedback from parents is not required. If the goal is high self-esteem, then only praise and positive reinforcement is needed, no matter what the child does. Critical or realistic feedback, particularly when given to a child in a low self-esteem state might sow the seeds of an enduring habit of negative self-evaluation. Negative self-evaluation often correlates with a number of other negative aspects of life, including pessimism and depression, self-doubt and heavy self-criticism, perfectionism, hostility and defensiveness, fear of failure and rejection, and envy of others (Donnellan, et al., 2005; Mruk, 2006). If critical or realistic feedback could lead to such unwanted consequences, parents may decide it is better to avoid criticism altogether and show only self-esteem boosting unconditional praise.

The concept of self-esteem has been criticized for its ethnocentrism, the lack of evidence showing a causal relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement, and its individualism and overemphasis on

self-actualization (for a review, see Kohn, 1994). Indeed, laboratory research shows that people who have high self-esteem are more likely to get angry and aggressive when their high opinion of themselves is threatened than are people with low self-esteem (Papps & O'Carroll, 1998). This concept of ego-threat defense is one subtle implication of an emphasis on self-esteem that parents are unlikely to anticipate when they indulge their children. In their indulgent efforts to strengthen their children's positive evaluation of themselves parents may also strengthen the children's resistance to any feedback or criticism, however constructive, which might threaten their optimistic, if not always realistic beliefs about themselves.

Positive psychology and happiness. Like their humanistic forebears, positive psychologists are interested in those aspects of human psychology that relate to flourishing and human potential. No topic is more important to positive psychologists than happiness (Seligman, 2002). Happiness has been defined in a variety of ways but it is generally undergirded with the assumption of hedonism (Veenhoven, 2003). Hedonism is the idea that pleasure in its varied manifestations is desirable and ought to be pursued, whereas pain in its many forms is undesirable and ought to be avoided. Accordingly, a happy person has maximal pleasure (that is, satisfaction, enjoyment, and wellbeing) and minimal pain (suffering, anxiety, and regret). Parents are in a unique position to influence this form of happiness in their young children. They can create positive experiences that feel good to their children and create a smile on their face. They can also try and protect children from negative experiences that would annoy them or cause them sadness. The important thing is that parents maximize the number of their children's pleasurable experiences and minimize the number of their painful experiences.

Positive psychology's shift of focus from the negative, disordered aspects of life to those positive aspects that accentuate happiness corresponds with a cultural trend in which parents are more focused on the hedonistic happiness of their children than ever before (Hooper, 2012; Wang, 2011). In this hedonistic culture, it is easy for parents to believe that if they put a great deal of time and effort into an elaborate birthday party for a child, for example, the



Parents are in a unique position to create positive experiences and influence the happiness of their young children. © Szefei.

party is only successful if the child gives the “good feeling” stamp of approval to it. If parents ask if the child had a good time on his or her special day and the child says he or she did not, then from a hedonistic perspective the parents have failed to deliver the pleasurable experience the child deserves. On this view, everything hinges on the hedonistic emotional satisfaction of the child (Slife & Richardson, 2008).

When considering this form of hedonistic happiness, one cannot help but think of Veruca Salt from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, who wielded her mood like a whip to manipulate her father into giving her whatever she claimed she needed in order to be happy. If, as hedonism implies, a child should have a happy childhood, and if happiness is defined by the child’s hedonistic emotional satisfaction, then parents really have no choice but to provide experiences that are pleasurable and enjoyable for the child and to protect the child from experiences that cause suffering and pain. But

is hedonism as fundamental to happiness and psychological flourishing as many positive psychologists, economists, evolutionary theorists, and other scholarly disciplines assume? A number of critics of positive psychology argue that neither hedonism nor emotional satisfaction is a necessary criterion of wellbeing and happiness (for a review, see Held, 2004). On the contrary, the pursuit of pleasure and minimization of pain might lead to a number of problematic psychological consequences, including selfishness, narcissism, and psychological disorders (Slife & Richardson, 2008). In this way, the negative aspects of psychology that positive psychologists deemphasize may rear their head precisely because of the efforts to accentuate the positive. Parents who strive to indulge their children's hedonistic emotional desires may unknowingly feed a number of unwanted psychological tendencies in their children, like narcissism.

Consumer culture and affluenza. Today's adolescents live in one of the wealthiest eras ever known in the history of the world. Never before have there been so many goods and services available to meet our every need and desire, and never before has there been consumption on so grand a scale. Even the most frugal parents today have more stuff than the parents of any previous generation. Whether they intend to or not, parents often model the indulgence of their desires for more material goods and are doing so at an ever earlier age. Indeed, there are more young adult millionaires than ever before in history. More young parents live in the large homes, drive the expensive cars, and travel on the costly vacations that would have previously been reserved for those mature individuals who spent a lifetime accruing the wealth necessary for such indulgences in their later life. Is it possible that the children of younger, wealthier parents are learning by social observation to have similar desires and even expectations for themselves despite their young age (Seiter, 1995)?

Today it is not unusual at all to see children as young as seven or eight years old with fully functional smart phones and access to every kind of technology imaginable, including video games and fully motorized scooters, bikes, and go-karts. Toddlers can be found sporting Air Jordan booties and Ralph Lauren onesies. Every kind of food is available for consumption,



There is a growing sense of entitlement to these many goods and services among youth in our culture, and if parents do not meet the demands of their children, they may be viewed as authoritarian and unfairly withholding. © Goodluz.

especially junk food, and adolescent obesity has reached epidemic levels (Jelalian & Steele, 2008). There is a growing sense of entitlement to these many goods and services among youth in our culture and if parents do not meet the demands of their children they may be viewed as authoritarian and unfairly withholding (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Even if, as many researchers have argued (for example, DeGraaf, Wann, & Naylor, 2005), this materialistic entitlement is a kind of sickness that like influenza can reach epidemic levels, indulgent parents may unknowingly act as if their children have as much right to be sick in this way as anybody else.

Affluenza, as DeGraaf et al. (2005) have labeled it, is a significant cultural trend that results in a number of problematic psychological and social outcomes, including debt, waste, excess, and anxiety that result from the constant pursuit of more and better things. It may also facilitate feelings

of entitlement and greed in children. As Philip Cushman (1990) describes it, this constant pursuit of things which cannot ultimately satisfy what people really need (that is, meaningful relationships with others) results in a growing emptiness in the self, which people may continue to mistakenly believe can best be filled by increased consumption of material things. The result is ever more emptiness. Might parents who model affluenza for their children set their children up for this kind of narcissistic emptiness that Cushman describes?

Noble and Great Ones

Parents in the LDS Church may face an additional temptation toward indulgence that is worth mentioning here. LDS parents and their children have been told many times that the youth who are coming forth in this the last hour of the dispensation of the fullness of times are among the most noble and great spirits of our Heavenly Father. These children have many great gifts and talents and have been prepared to come into the world in a time of great challenges and opportunities. To what extent might LDS parents be prone to adopt a view of their children as being foreordained to a great calling or purpose? To what extent might they feel unqualified to parent children with such advanced abilities and talents? Could this uniquely LDS understanding of children make it easy for some LDS parents to overemphasize their children's strengths and to underemphasize their weaknesses? Might it make constructive criticism and honest feedback hard to come by and unbounded praise the norm? To what extent does this knowledge lead to more permissive parenting where children are allowed to govern themselves too early and without properly enforced limits?

Narcissism and Parents of LDS Youth

Though we are not aware of any published studies that examine parental indulgence and narcissistic tendencies among LDS youth specifically, we

see no reason to expect that parents of LDS youth are immune to the influences just reviewed. On the contrary, each of these sources may present a particular vulnerability for LDS parents. For example, similar to humanistic psychologists, LDS parents believe their children are unique. They believe they existed as unique intelligences and then spirits prior to earth life where they now exist as unique souls—united spirits and bodies (see Abraham 3:22). LDS parents, like humanistic psychologists, also believe their children have a potential which is of primary importance to their healthy growth and development. As children of a divine king, they have the potential to become like God (see D&C 88:107). These overlapping ideas are quite positive. However, if LDS parents are influenced by the perspective of humanistic psychology in their parenting they may forget that our children's ultimate purpose, as children of God, is to glorify him and serve others, not to focus primarily on meeting their unique potential and needs, no matter how divine their origin may be.

LDS parents may also have a particular vulnerability with regard to relativism. Although LDS parents don't embrace moral and epistemological relativism per se, they can face a relativism-like challenge when dealing with the personal revelations their children claim to receive, particularly when they are older. For example, when a young adult reports that he or she has received an answer to prayer about attending a certain college, taking a job, going on a mission, or getting married parents may not feel comfortable countering the decision if they disagree. They may find it appropriate to counsel, consult, and cajole, but in a postmodern culture they would stop short of telling the child his or her decision is wrong. To tell the child his or her revelation is wrong would not only be intolerant of the child's truth but might also undermine the lesson on personal revelation that many LDS parents try to teach their children. Thus once the child's trump card of personal revelation has been played, it can feel like all other hands must fold.

Parents in the Church are also especially likely to desire high self-esteem for their children. They have been taught and also teach their children that every person is a child of God of inherent worth (see D&C 18:10; Lockhart,

1995). Children are princes and princesses of a divine King and are highly esteemed by their Heavenly Father. Given their inherent value LDS parents may believe their children ought to also have high self-esteem. They ought to value themselves as God values them and know that they are among his noble and great ones. From this perspective, low self-esteem would not accord with their divine nature and must at some level be seen as a denial of the love God has for the child. To the extent that these beliefs lead parents to focus primarily on developing the esteem of the child toward himself or herself, parents risk deemphasizing the importance of esteeming God first and foremost in the child's life.

The scriptures teach that God's plan for his children is a plan of happiness (see Alma 42:8; 2 Nephi 9:13). Insofar as LDS parents' understanding of happiness consists of hedonistic emotional satisfaction, it will be difficult for them not to desire the current and/or ultimate hedonistic happiness of their children. They may strive to protect or rescue their children from suffering even when that suffering may be part of God's plan and could help the children grow and progress. In his book *Faith Precedes the Miracle*, President Spencer W. Kimball quoted Orson F. Whitney, who stated:

No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude and humility. All that we suffer and all that we endure, especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God . . . and it is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we come here to acquire and which will make us more like our Father and Mother in heaven (pp. 97–98).

Affluenza may also present unique challenges to LDS parents, particularly if they believe their prosperity is a sign of their being blessed by God for their righteousness and hard work. When parents believe God has

blessed them with many material possessions they are more likely to model a focus on material consumption and may also nourish a sense of entitlement in children who may come to believe that if they live an obedient and righteous life God will bless and prosper them in a similar manner.

We remind the reader that none of these influences alone or in combination necessarily create indulgent parenting or lead to narcissism in children. However, they can facilitate and justify parental indulgence where inclinations toward it are already present. Parents who are uncomfortable giving honest feedback to their children or cannot tolerate their children feeling bad, for example, can find a supportive rationale for their indulgent actions in the self-esteem literature. Parents who like lavishing their children with praise will receive reinforcement for those actions in the concept of unconditional positive regard in humanistic psychology. And parents who tend to aggrandize the gifts and talents of their children will find able justification for that focus in one of the major goals of positive psychology, which is “to find and nurture genius and talent” (Compton, 2004, p. 5). For LDS parents, further reinforcement for these indulgences can come from their awareness of their children’s divine potential and their knowledge of their children’s gifts and talents, including those described in their children’s patriarchal blessings. With all these influences and all the things LDS parents know about their children and what they can become, how can LDS parents help but lift their child up onto a pedestal?

Fight Back the Tide of Narcissism

We offer two suggestions that may aid LDS parents in their efforts to critically examine their own tendencies toward parental indulgence and to fight back the rising tide of narcissism that poses a particular threat to their children. The first suggestion is for parents to study, exemplify, and teach their children the attributes of Christ. The second suggestion is for parents to study Heavenly Father’s parenting of his children and then compare and contrast that parenting style with their own.

Teach Children the Attributes of Christ

There is no better role model for children than Christ. This is true in all respects, but it is particularly significant with regard to narcissism. After all, Christ is the Firstborn of the Father in the spirit and the Only Begotten of the Father in the flesh. He is both fully God and fully human and has available to him all power and knowledge. His talents and gifts are innumerable, and his potential is unlimited. He has more reason than any other being to aggrandize himself above all others, yet he does not do it. On the contrary, when he lived on earth, he abased and condescended himself for our sakes, allowing himself to be a little child, wholly dependent on parents and others. As he grew into adulthood, he maintained his meekness and humility before the Father and others. Even when he was thoroughly exhausted from his long fast in the wilderness, he did not succumb to the temptations of the adversary to exercise his godly powers and lift himself above others. Though falsely accused, brought before Pilate for judgment, and sent to Golgotha to be crucified, he chose to be a lamb instead of a lion, gentle of spirit and lowly of heart.

When thinking of Christ's example, one is reminded of his words to Joseph in the Doctrine and Covenants where he warned Joseph about the tendency to lift oneself above others: "We have learned by sad experience," the Lord taught Joseph, "that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion" (D&C 121:39). In contrast to that worldly self-aggrandizement over others, the Lord made it clear to Joseph that "no power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood" (v. 41) but only by the application of Christlike attributes, "by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; by kindness and pure knowledge. . ." (vv. 41–42).

During his earthly sojourn, Christ refused to manifest the form of power Satan and many people expected of a Messiah, knowing that his influence upon the hearts of people across the world and over generations



Christ maintained meekness and humility before the Father and others. He showed his love for his disciples in this instance by serving them. Del Parson, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

of time would be greater if it stemmed from his meekness and humility. Consider as an example the incredible influence Christ had on Peter (and on each of us who read the story) when he knelt down and washed Peter's feet. If Christ had commanded Peter to wash his feet, Peter would have happily obeyed his Lord and would have felt honored to do so, but it would not have left the same lasting impression on Peter's heart as did Christ's humble act of self-abasement. Because Christ acted in humility, Peter, knowing full well who Christ was, must have uncomfortably sat there in utter amazement that a God would deign to wash his dirty feet; and he and the other apostles surely never forgot the lesson they learned that day as they went on to serve others in like manner for the rest of their lives.

Similarly, parents can teach their children by word and by example that true and lasting power and influence comes not from worldly fame, prestige, or self-aggrandizement, but from the attributes of Christ that are developed and instilled in their hearts as they humble themselves before God and serve others in a spirit of meekness (see 1 Peter 3:4). On this point Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1983) has said, "The meek go on fewer ego trips, but they have far

greater adventures. Ego trips, those ‘travel now and pay later’ indulgences, are always detours. The straight and narrow path is, after all, the only path which takes us to new and breathtaking places” (p. 72).

Albert Bandura’s (1977) well-known theory of social learning provides a great deal of evidence supporting the idea that children learn from and often follow the model of their parents in their own conduct. Thus, if parents model the attributes of Christ, their children are more likely to practice those attributes as well. On the other hand, if parents indulge their children, then their children will be more likely to indulge themselves. Elder Lynn G. Robbins (2011) of the Seventy said, “To be good parents, one of the most important things we can teach our children is how to be more like the Savior” (p. 104). Teaching and modeling Christlike attributes can be a great spiritual inoculation against the development of narcissistic tendencies in our children

Follow Heavenly Father’s Example

A second spiritual resource that can aid parents in their efforts to fight back the rising tide of narcissism is the example of Heavenly Father’s parenting that is manifest in the scriptures and through our personal experiences with him. Two relevant questions can be asked. First, does Heavenly Father lavish praise on his children? Second, is Heavenly Father’s praise unrelated to performance? Recall that parental indulgence includes an overabundance of praise with little critical feedback as well as praising children regardless of their successes or failures. Does Heavenly Father indulge us, his children, in similar ways?

The answer to the first question regarding God lavishing praise on his children is answered regularly in the relationship of Heavenly Father to his close associates, the prophets. Praise rarely exceeds a simple “blessed art thou” (Matthew 16:17; Luke 1:28, 42). Consider again the example of Joseph Smith. He was given some praise as seemed reasonably needed to lift his spirits and energize his work, but he was also regularly chastised and occasionally rebuked for his misdeeds, particularly when he was young and learning to submit his will to God. For example, after losing

the 116 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript, the Lord let Joseph know his disapproval in no uncertain terms, stating, “For although a man may have many revelations and have power to do many mighty works, yet if he boasts in his own strength, and sets at naught the counsels of God, and follows after the dictates of his own will and carnal desires, he must fall and incur the vengeance of a just God upon him” (D&C 3:4). Father in Heaven also did not remove obstacles from Joseph’s path or make things easier for him. He allowed him to suffer because it would strengthen Joseph and because it was more important for Joseph to learn to esteem his Heavenly Father than to esteem himself. Even the Savior, a child of God without blemish or sin, was allowed to endure the great suffering of the atonement without a reprieve from his father, crying out “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Surely, his father felt a great desire to indulge his innocent son in this time of great suffering, to ease his pain, and remove his burden, but he stayed his comforting hand, knowing that it was necessary for Christ to experience his absence for a time so he could in turn succor us when we feel abandoned and alone. Elder Maxwell (1997) said:

Jesus’ perfect empathy was ensured when, along with His Atonement for our sins, He took upon Himself our sicknesses, sorrows, griefs, and infirmities and came to know these “according to the flesh” (Alma 7:11–12). He did this in order that He might be filled with perfect, personal mercy and empathy and thereby know how to succor us in our infirmities. He thus fully comprehends human suffering. Truly Christ “descended below all things, in that He comprehended all things” (D&C 88:6). (p. 7)

Heavenly Father allowed his only begotten son to suffer body and spirit so he could lift us up, not so he could aggrandize himself.

As to God’s parenting and the relationship of performance and praise there is little room for debate. God tells us that he is pleased when we do

his will and keep his commandments and that he is not pleased when we are disobedient or ungrateful. He promises blessings for righteous action and punishment for sin. If he did not manifest his pleasure and displeasure in response to our performance of our duties, it would be difficult for us to learn his ways and to align our will with his. As Elder Maxwell (1995) has said, “Only by aligning our wills with God’s is full happiness to be found” (p. 23). Without God’s genuine feedback, it would be all but impossible for us to know how to return to him.

Unlike what might seem to be the case with some people, God’s love for us is in no way diminished when he shows us his displeasure or punishes us by, for example, removing the presence of the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, he manifests his great love to us by his displeasure and punishments. Such actions give us an opportunity to be humbled and to repent and to more fully become his true disciples. They help us to have the companionship of the Spirit more regularly and more strongly in our lives. Our Heavenly Father does not praise or punish us willy-nilly but responds perfectly to our actions in a manner that gives us the best opportunity to grow closer to him. Surely, there is no better model of parenting for us to emulate than that.

Conclusion

Much more could be written about the differences between indulgent parenting in an increasingly narcissistic culture and a gospel-based approach to parenting that is exemplified by Christ and our Heavenly Father. Suffice it to say at this point, that the cultural influences toward indulgence and the teachings of the gospel have fundamentally different sets of core assumptions. The gospel is not principally concerned with the actualization of the self but with the glorification of God and the celestial actualization of others through selfless service. Elder William R. Bradford (1987) of the First Quorum of the Seventy said, “The only way under the heavens whereby a person can be sanctified is in selfless service” (p. 76). The gospel does not localize truth and morality in the individual, but in a God who speaks to us individually and



Even the Savior, a child of God without blemish or sin, was allowed to endure the great suffering of the atonement without a reprieve from his father. Harry Anderson, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



The gospel encourages us to use our talents and gifts to bless the lives of others with humility and meekness. Welden Andersen, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

communally through his prophets and, in the case of children, often through their parents (see Proverbs 22:6). Elder L. Tom Perry (2012) said, “According to the great plan of happiness, it is goodly parents who are entrusted with the care and development of Heavenly Father’s children” (p. 27).

The gospel also does not focus esteem on ourselves but on our God who deserves all the glory and gratitude for who we are and what we can do. “True teachers of the word of God always seek to give God the glory and turn attention away from themselves” (*New Testament: Gospel Doctrine Manual*, 2002, p. 127). The plan of happiness is not the plan of the absence of suffering or the plan of feeling good, nor is the accrual of wealth and material goods the entitlement of those who keep the commandments. On the contrary, the gospel is the pure love of Christ, or charity, that leads us to submit ourselves to God and others in a spirit of humility and meekness and to use the talents and gifts with which God has blessed us to uplift and edify others, not to aggrandize ourselves or our children.

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