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Understanding Narcissism

How to Co-Parent with a Narcissist

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One of the scariest moments that my clients report is when they first realize that the person that they are raising their children with has a [Narcissistic Personality Disorder](#). Whether they choose to stay with their [Narcissistic](#) mate or leave, this person will be their children's parent forever. After they get over their own shock, the first question that they ask me is: How do I help and protect our children so that they are not damaged by my mate's flaws?

They want to know such things as:

- *What can I do to help my children feel loved and valued for who they are?*
- *Should I try and explain their Narcissistic parent's issues to them?*
- *Is there anything that I can do to protect them from my partner's unfair attacks?*
- *What can I give them that my Narcissistic mate cannot?*

THE 4 PILLARS

If you too are struggling with this issue, here are some things that you may find useful. I have organized my suggestions into four basic groups: [Identity](#), [Love](#), [Permission](#), and [Skills](#). I think of them as four pillars that will support your children and help keep them stable, despite your mate's instability and personal limitations. Each one focuses on a crucial aspect of what children need to grow into happy, productive, and self-confident adults. I am making them separate groups here for the purpose of teaching about them. In reality they blend together to form

one sturdy support for the child.

PILLAR 1—IDENTITY

Children are not born with a clear sense of identity or how they fit into the world. They need adult support in order to form a realistic, stable, and integrated sense of self.

Children develop their sense of identity in three major ways:

1. Exploration and Experimentation: As children explore the world around them and experiment with different activities through play or in school, they start to discover what interests them, what they are good at, and how they compare to those around them.

2. Other People's Reactions: Children are very influenced by how significant people in their lives view them. In 1902 the social psychologist Charles Horton Cooley introduced the concept of "The Looking Glass Self" to explain how our view of ourselves is partly the result of how those around us view us. This means that children notice how adults and other children see them and start to identify with whatever is "mirrored" back to them.

3. Successes and Failures: As children explore and experiment and compare themselves to other children, they begin to have successes and failures. They find that some things come easily to them, such as carrying a tune or adding up numbers in their head, while others may be a struggle. They also learn that if they persist at things, they will eventually get better at them.

Narcissistic [parents](#) generally only recognize and support those aspects of the growing child's identity that are in accord with their Narcissistic values and enhance their need to see themselves as "special." Everything else is likely to be devalued as stupid, pointless, or wrong. This is one of the areas in which the non-Narcissistic parent can be an advocate for the child's exploration of what he or she is naturally drawn to in the world.

Suggestion: This has to be done tactfully so that the Narcissistic parent does not feel attacked. Instead of confronting or criticizing the Narcissistic parent for not supporting the child's explorations of his or her authentic interests, it is best to tie the exploration to something the Narcissistic parent approves of and wants to encourage.

Example of Supporting Exploration: Jennie and her Magic Kit

The Problem: Jenny's Narcissistic father Tom believed that his 8-year old daughter should focus all her attention on doing well in school. He was determined that all of his children, including Jennie, should go to Ivy League schools. He also believed that it was never too early to start accumulating the skills and experiences that would enhance their future college applications.

When Jenny was given a magic kit as a present by one of her friends for her eighth birthday, she became fascinated by the whole concept of creating illusions. She asked to be taken to see shows in which professional magicians performed and she practiced her own basic tricks from the kit every day. This was the first real hobby that Jenny had ever pursued.

Jenny's father became annoyed and made it clear that he viewed her preoccupation with stage magic as a complete waste of time. He would have forbade her to continue, but his non-narcissistic wife Grace stepped in and persuaded him to let Jenny continue, as long as her grades did not suffer.

The Solution: Grace reframed Jenny's hobby in terms the father could support:

You and I both want Jenny to be confident and when she goes away to college to be able to work on things on her own without needing us to continually prompt her. We also want her to be comfortable as a leader. I think that her interest in magic and the fact that she is learning to perform her tricks in front of people, will contribute to her ability to do that.

Pillar 2—LOVE

Children need to feel unconditionally loved in a way that is not dependent on the adult's mood. Part of feeling loved is knowing that your parents accept you for who you are and love you even though you are not perfect and you make mistakes. This love needs to be consistent. This does not mean that you cannot chastise your children for bad behavior or correct them when they are making mistakes. It means that there is an undercurrent of love that exists like background music through everything that happens both good and bad.

Narcissistic parents have some major issues that get in the way of them providing stable, unconditional love. I will just mention two of the main ones here:

Narcissists lack “Object Constancy.” “Object Constancy” is the psychological term for the capacity to maintain your positive emotions about someone while you are feeling hurt, frustrated, angry, or disappointed by the person. This means that when Narcissistic parents feel any negative feeling towards their children, they completely lose touch with their loving feelings.

Without “Object Constancy” love turns to hatred very quickly. Therefore, at best the love of Narcissistic parents towards their child has an “on and off” quality—there is no steady stream of Love Music playing underneath everything all the time. At worst, Narcissistic parents become abusive during the times that they are unable to access their past love for their child.

Narcissists have unstable self-esteem: Narcissistic parents are preoccupied with trying to keep their shaky self-esteem high. They relate to their children as either assets that reflect well on them and will enhance their self-esteem or deficits that reflect poorly on them and will cause them to lose status.

This combination of a lack of “Object Constancy” and a continual focus on self-esteem enhancement creates a situation of emotional instability for the children. Sometimes they feel loved and will get a lot of attention and praise, other times they feel that their Narcissistic parent literally despises them. This is very confusing for children and can result in their having two separate and irreconcilable views of themselves as either “special” or “worthless.” In essence, this would be a recreation of the same identity problem with which the Narcissistic parent is struggling.

This is where the non-Narcissistic parent's steady love can have a stabilizing effect on the children's identity. Do not worry, you do not have to be perfect to counteract your Narcissistic mate's influence. You just need to be able to remember that you love your children while they are behaving badly (Object Constancy) and not have your personal self-esteem be dependent on their achievements. We are talking about “good enough loving,” not being a parental Saint.

Example of Unconditional Love: Janet and her Chubby Daughter

The Problem: Janet is a very beautiful and very thin Narcissistic mother. Her daughter Allie has just turned 10 years old and has started to go through an awkward pre-pubescent stage. Up until now, Allie has been adorable in Janet's eyes. Now Janet is embarrassed by the way that Allie looks and is continually saying things to her that undermine Allie's self-confidence and feeling of being loved by her mother:

You used to be such a pretty child. Everyone would stop us on the street to say how lovely you were. Now you are so chubby and nothing you wear ever looks right on you, no matter how hard I try to buy you the right clothes.

The Solution: John loves his wife and understands how much she cares about appearances, but he was not going to sit back and just hope that all her negative comments went over Allie's head. Instead, he decided that he and Allie would take some alone time together and do activities that Allie liked that had nothing to do with how she looked. He also made sure to tell Allie how much he loved her. Allie was able to make the shift from being “Mommy's disappointment” to “Daddy's girl.”

Suggestion: Narcissists cannot take criticism. When you are suggesting a change, use praise and connect it to

something positive that the Narcissistic parent can support.

John knew that if he tried to complain to Janet about her behavior, all he would have accomplished would have been to start a fight. Instead, he praised Janet for her past mothering, acknowledged that Allie was at a “difficult” stage, and carefully framed his intentions in a way that Janet could accept.

John said:

You have been a great Mom to Allie. I know that she is at a difficult stage right now. You have done so much for her. I think it is my turn to step up and spend more time with Allie so that you have more time to be with your friends.

Janet could agree that she had been a great mother and that it was now John’s turn to take more time with Allie. She was happy to go along with John’s plan to take Allie for a father-daughter day every weekend. John framing it as “his turn” also made her feel less **guilty** about how she felt about Allie. Janet was not a stupid woman. On some level she understood that her comments were not helpful, but she could not help making them. Like many Narcissists, Janet was unable to censor herself and keep her disappointment about how Allie looked to herself. She imagined that everyone looked at Allie as critically as she did.

Janet envied those of her friends whose daughters seemed to be navigating this stage more gracefully and still looked slim and beautiful in their cute little outfits. Janet was deeply afraid that Allie would grow up to be a fat, ugly teenager—someone that a Narcissist like Janet could never really love.

Allie blossomed under her father’s loving gaze and they forged a close and especially loving relationship that lasted for the rest of their lives. Her father’s ability to unconditionally love her gave Allie the confidence she needed to later choose a mate who would do the same.

Pillar 3—PERMISSION

Children need to be given support and permission to explore their world. They also need permission to reach their own conclusions, even if this means that they think differently about an issue than their parents. This last is especially hard for Narcissistic parents because they generally lack the capacity to see the world from any point of view other than their own.

Narcissists suffer from “One-Mindedness”: Psychologists call this inability to understand that there can be equally valid, but different ways to view a situation, “One-Mindedness.” People with “One-Mindedness” assume that their view is the only correct one and that anyone who thinks differently from them is 100% wrong.

Solution: What you can do to counteract your mate’s influence and limited view of life is to spend quality time alone with your children and simply explore ideas from different perspectives. You can begin by starting a conversation about almost anything and then ask interesting questions that invite your children to think and respond with their own ideas.

Example: Watching TV with Leo—Combatting “One-Mindedness”

You are watching a television documentary about Japanese whale fishing. The documentary is about whether Japanese whale fishermen should be permitted to keep killing whales because this has been their traditional livelihood for many centuries, or should whale fishing be banned because (1) Whales may become extinct someday if this fishing continues, and (2) Whales are clever mammals with a right to live their own lives without being hunted by humans. You turn to Leo and ask any of the following questions:

- *What do you think about this issue after watching the show?*
- *If you were a Japanese whale fisherman, how might you feel?*
- *What do you think the whales think about this?*
- *Do you think the whales understand what is going on?*

All of these questions are designed to give the child an opportunity to look at the same situation through different lenses without necessarily reaching a conclusion about what is right or wrong. Repeated experiences of looking at situations from different perspectives combats any tendency towards “One-Mindedness” that has been modeled by the Narcissistic parent.

Pillar 4—SKILL TRAINING

There are a number of important life skills, such as emotional **empathy** and the ability to apologize, that the Narcissistic parent lacks. These are relatively easy for the non-Narcissistic parent to teach.

- **Teaching Emotional Empathy**

Narcissists lack emotional empathy. This means that Narcissistic parents cannot feel what their children are feeling in response to their actions. They have to rely on **cognitive** empathy—thinking and reflecting-- in order to understand their impact on their children. Unfortunately, cognitive empathy requires more **motivation** and time. It is highly unlikely that angry Narcissistic parents will stop in the middle of a fight to reflect on their impact on their children and spouse.

The non-Narcissistic parent can help their children develop their capacity for emotional empathy. There are two simple ways to do this: You can model empathy and also find opportunities that allow you to explain empathy.

Modeling Empathy: *Empathy teaches empathy.* You empathize with your children’s experience, they feel your concern and interest, and they internalize an image of a caring and empathic parent. This can be done as simply as catching their gaze from across the room, and smiling when they seem happy, or looking concerned when they appear hurt or unhappy.

Example: Caroline and her Aunt Sylvia had a very special relationship. Caroline knew her Aunt loved and understood her. Sometimes at family dinners, when Caroline’s Narcissistic father was holding forth and boring everyone to death, Caroline and Aunt Sylvia would just look at each other and smile.

Explaining Empathy: This involves pointing out how other people might be feeling during potentially hurtful interactions. This method directs your child’s attention to people’s impact on the feelings of those around them.

Example: Josh in the Playground

Josh is three years old. His father Jerry is an **Exhibitionist** Narcissist who likes to talk and lecture people whenever he can find an audience. Jerry has no emotional empathy and does not notice his impact on the people around him. When someone appears tired, Jerry is likely to chastise them for not listening closely enough to what he is saying, rather than empathizing with their fatigue. Josh’s mother Joan puts up with her husband’s self-centered behavior, but does not want Josh to emulate it. She realizes that she will have to be the main person to teach Josh about other people’s feelings.

Every Saturday, Joan takes Josh to a nearby playground. In addition to playing with him on the slide, seesaw, and swing set, she starts to point out the little human dramas that are going on around them.

Hey Josh. Do you see that little boy over there? He just pushed that little girl out of his way and grabbed her turn on the swing. She looks like she is very sad and about to cry. How about if we go over and ask her to join you on the seesaw?

Or another time:

That big kid is hogging the slide and pushing the little kids out of the way. I bet they feel afraid. I wonder whether the big kid knows that he is being mean. What do you think?

- **Teaching a Child How to Apologize**

Narcissistic parents generally do not apologize for their bad behavior. They find it difficult to ever admit that they have acted badly or been wrong about anything. Part of this is about supporting their shaky self-esteem. They believe that there are only two choices in life: either they are “special and perfect” or they are “worthless and defective.” If they apologize and admit that they were wrong, they can no longer see themselves as perfect. In their eyes, this means that they are not just apologizing; they are now admitting to you, themselves, and the entire world that they are really worthless garbage. Very few Narcissists can tolerate that extreme shift in self-view without become filled with unbearable [shame](#) and sinking into [depression](#).

Another reason that some Narcissistic parents find apologizing agonizing is that their parents treated them badly whenever they were caught making a mistake. Many of my Narcissistic clients tell me that their parents shamed them whenever they did anything wrong. Admitting to a mistake just led to even more criticism, instead of [forgiveness](#) and help. These Narcissistic parents are still acting under the assumption that acknowledging a mistake and apologizing will simply open the door to even more criticism.

On the rare occasions that they do apologize, they often will focus on how the child provoked their reaction. In essence, though they may start the apologize with good intentions, they rarely can end it without blaming the victim or in some other way letting themselves off the hook. Then, they are likely to erase the whole [memory](#). If you or the child refers to it at a later time, they are likely to refuse to talk about it and get angry if you persist. They interpret you bringing the incident back up as you “rubbing their nose in it,” not as an attempt to get clarity.

It is very easy to teach your child how to apologize. Whenever you make a mistake in your child's presence, you simply say to your child: *I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that.* If you ever do or say something that hurts your child and you realize it afterwards, you tell your child: *I am so sorry. I didn't realize then that what I said hurt you. I want to apologize to you.* Your child will soon see apologizing as no big deal and the right thing to do.

- **Explaining Narcissistic Behavior**

When the children are older, you might consider explaining some of the basic issues associated with Narcissism. You can do this without specifically talking about Narcissistic [Personality Disorder](#) or diagnosing the parent. The basic idea is to give the children a way to understand the Narcissistic parent's behavior. Here are some simple explanations that relate to common Narcissistic issues. I will switch off between using the father and the mother in the example. You can adapt my answers to the particular needs of your family.

Object Constancy: “Some people have trouble remembering that they love you when they are mad at you, so they [act](#) really mean in the moment. Later, when they are calmer, they can remember that they love you. I know this feels horrible when it is happening to you, but it is not really about you. Your mother never learned how to do this.”

Splitting: “Your father has a problem. He often sees one person as the “Good one” and another as the “Bad one.” That is why he cannot see both you and your sister as “good” at the same time. You have probably notice that he switches back and forth. If one of you is the “good one,” than the other one becomes the “bad one.”

Devaluation: “Your mother sometimes says very mean things to you when she gets mad at you. I know that makes you feel very hurt. I want you to know that it is not your fault that she is being so mean to you. Your Mommy has a problem controlling what she says when she is angry. You may have done something wrong to make her angry, but you do not deserve to be treated so badly. Sometimes she feels as if you do not respect her enough and she is trying to teach you a lesson by putting you down. She is wrong, but telling her will not help. Everyone has weaknesses, and that is one of hers.”

Blame: “Some people have a problem taking responsibility for their mistakes. Instead, they blame other people. They may also have trouble apologizing, even when they know they are wrong and someone else is right. Your father has this problem. Sometimes he blames you for things that are not your fault. You could be the best kid in the

whole world and he would still behave this way. This is about him, not you. Everyone has limitations and this is one of your father's."

- **Protecting your Children from Abuse**

Narcissistic parents are very vulnerable to feeling personally rejected by their children's attempts to become separate individuals. They also tend to overreact to their children's misbehavior. They are easily insulted by a wide range of behaviors that non-Narcissistic parents accept as normal. This hyper-sensitivity towards slights leads Narcissistic parents to become furious whenever they feel that their personal values or parental authority are being challenged. Normal situations quickly escalate into fights. When this happens, Narcissistic parents may express their **anger** by belittling their children's opinions, appearance, or behavior and then attempt to **bully** them into admitting that they are completely wrong. If the children do not submit, this may escalate into outright abuse.

Problem: All of the above will be very painful for you, the non-Narcissistic parent to tolerate, as you are likely to have the emotional empathy that your Narcissistic mate lacks. You are also likely to have learned by now, that if you directly confront your Narcissistic mate, your mate will turn on you and start to blame you for the whole situation: "If you did not coddle him, he wouldn't sprout these ridiculous ideas. See what you have done! This is all your fault!"

The non-Narcissistic parent is left with no good choices. Everything that you try to do to de-escalate the situation is likely to simply prolong the fight. Narcissists are rarely able to apologize, especially in the heat of the moment. They see the whole situation as a dominance fight and a challenge.

If your child is being physically and emotionally abused, you must step in and stop it. Just be prepared for World War III unless you are supremely tactful. You also need to decide where the boundary is between your mate being mean and your mate being abusive. Your house will be in a constant uproar if you try and stop every mean thing that your Narcissistic partner says or does to your child.

Step 1: Establish a Boundary

Choose a boundary and stick to it. It is important to let your mate know where the boundary is before you are in the middle of a fight. Ideally, you will pick a time when you are both feeling calm and loving to discuss this issue ahead of time.

Let's take "no hitting" as an example.

Example: Barry is a Narcissistic man who was raised by a brutal father who disciplined him and his sister with a leather strap. He knows that he grew to hate his father because of those beatings, but when his son Liam misbehaves, Barry's first impulse is to hit him. Barry's wife Ellen does not believe in physical **punishment**. When they decided to have children, Ellen never imagined that Barry would hit their child. Now that she knows that he might, she knows that she has to nip this in the bud quickly and, if possible, diplomatically. She says:

I know Liam misbehaves and your first impulse is to hit him. But I also know that you grew to hate your father because he beat you. Your father's behavior, and your mother not standing up to him about it, almost ruined your life. It certainly ruined your relationship to this day with your father. You can barely tolerate his presence.

Liam loves and trusts you. I know you do not ever want to repeat your father's mistakes. Let's come up with some other, non-physical, punishments for when he misbehaves.

Barry and Ellen agreed to a "no-hitting" rule and together came up with some alternative punishments for various kinds of misbehavior.

Step 2: What to Do When Your Mate Starts to Cross the Boundary

When your mate starts to cross the boundary, stay calm, do not yell, and try to be diplomatic. Your first impulse may

be to scream “stop!” and get nasty with him or her. If you focus on your mate’s bad behavior now, this will only make things worse. I suggest that you do your best to be calm and soothing instead—even though this is the very last thing that you may feel like doing.

Suggestion: Empathize with your mate’s goal and do not blame your mate. Instead, remind them of your agreement about “no hitting” and offer an alternative punishment that is not so overly harsh. I suggest that you use “we” language instead of blaming your mate because you want the two of you to stay aligned and Narcissists do not respond well to being blamed.

I know you are very angry with Liam. I agree with you that he needs to learn that what he did is not acceptable. Let’s stick to our “no-hitting” rule. We both know how much he loves playing computer games. How about if we say: “No games for a week?”

If that does not work, you will need to be strong and prepared to defend the boundary, even if it lands you in [divorce court](#).

Punchline: It is never easy to be a parent. It is much harder when your co-parent has a Narcissistic [Personality Disorder](#). The good news is that there is a lot that you can do to minimize the damage of having a Narcissistic parent. You will have to step in and be the one to give your children whatever their Narcissistic parent cannot provide: permission to explore their identity and the world around them, unconditional love, protection from abuse, and reassurance that they are not the cause of their parent’s bad behavior.