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RAISING STRONG CHILDREN: SELF-ESTEEM VERSUS SELF-CONTROL

You're a superstar no matter who you are or where you come from—and you were born that way!

—Lady Gaga

Brats are not born. They're made.

—Deborah Carroll, a.k.a. Nanny Deb

Thanks to the wonders of reality TV, middle-class parents across the United States have experienced a privilege once limited to the wealthy: outsourcing their jobs to a British nanny. Their stories vary, as you would expect from unhappy families, but the basic narrative arc is the same for each episode of this genre, whether it's *Nanny 911* or *Supernanny.* It begins in a home with children running wild—crying, screaming, spitting, pulling hair, flinging sippy cups, scrawling crayon graffiti on sheets, smashing toys, punching parents, strangling siblings. They're literally climbing the walls of a

ranch house in suburban St. Louis at the start of a classic *Nanny 911* episode titled "The Little House of Horrors." Then, and none too soon, a British nanny arrives at the home dressed in full Victorian regalia—black skirt, pin-striped black vest, black stockings, burgundy cloche and matching cape with gold buttons and chain—as the narrator makes a solemn announcement: "Parents of America, help is on the way!"

How did it come to this?

You might think the programs are hyping the children's misbehavior, but the producers will tell you that the restrictions of prime-time television prevented them from showing some of the worst moments, like when a four-year-old on Long Island looked up at the woman who'd given him life and said, "Fuck off, Mom!" What's gone wrong? The immediate impulse is to fault the parents, and we'll get to the ones in that St. Louis home shortly. But it's not fair to put all the blame on them or any of the other parents seeking foreign aid. America's parents couldn't have produced these brats all by themselves. They had lots of help from the nation's leading educators, journalists, and, above all, psychologists.

The theory of self-esteem was a well-intentioned attempt to use psychology for the public good, and it did indeed seem promising at first. Baumeister spent much of his early career on the self-esteem bandwagon. He was impressed by research showing that students with high self-esteem had high grades, while students with low-self esteem tended to struggle in school. Other studies revealed that unwed mothers, drug addicts, and criminals had low self-esteem. The correlations weren't large, but they were statistically significant, and the results inspired a movement led by psychotherapists like Nathaniel Branden. "I cannot think of a single psychological problem—from anxiety and depression, to fear of intimacy, to spouse battery or child molestation—that is not traceable to the problem of low self-esteem," Branden wrote. Andrew Mecca, the drug-treatment expert who became chairman of California's task force on self-esteem, explained

that "virtually every social problem can be traced to people's lack of self-love." All this enthusiasm led to a new approach to child rearing imparted by psychologists, teachers, journalists, and artists like Whitney Houston. She summed up this philosophy in her 1980s hit song "The Greatest Love of All," which was revealed to be none other than . . . oneself. The key to success was self-esteem. For children to succeed, she explained, they simply need to be shown "all the beauty they possess inside."

It was a novel but irresistible idea to the millions who began trying to improve children's academic skills by encouraging them to think, *I'm really good at things.* At home, parents practiced dispensing extra praise. Coaches made sure everyone got a trophy, not just the winners. The Girl Scouts adopted a program called "uniquely ME!" In school, children made collages of their favorite traits and discussed what they liked best about one another. "Mutual admiration society" used to be a disparaging phrase, but today's young adults grew up with it as the social norm. Whitney Houston's message was carried to the next generation by Lady Gaga, who reassured her fans at a concert, "You're a superstar no matter who you are or where you come from—and you were born that way!" The fans cheered her right back, naturally, and then Lady Gaga reciprocated by lifting a bright torch and sweeping its light across the audience. "Hey, kids!" she shouted. "When you leave tonight, you don't leave loving me more. You leave loving *yourself* more!"

All these mutual affirmation exercises were pleasant enough, and they were supposed to do even more long-term good than conventional lessons. When the state of California asked researchers to evaluate the evidence on self-esteem, the news seemed promising. Neil Smelser, the distinguished sociologist at Berkeley who edited the report, declared on the first page that "many, if not most, of the major problems plaguing society have roots in the low self-esteem of many of the people who make up society."

He also noted, in a later passage that wasn't nearly as newswor-

thy, that it was "disappointing" to see the lack of really solid scientific evidence "to date." But better results were expected once more work was done, and there was plenty of money available for self-esteem research. The studies continued, and eventually another institution commissioned another report. This time it was not a political unit, like the state of California, but a scientific body, the Association for Psychological Science. The conclusions did not inspire any performances from Whitney Houston or Lady Gaga.

From Self-esteem to Narcissism

The psychologists on the review panel, which included Baumeister, sifted through thousands of studies looking for the ones that met high standards of research quality. The panel found several hundred, like the one that tracked high school students for several years in order to understand the correlation between self-esteem and good grades. Yes, students with higher self-esteem did have higher grades. But which came first? Did students' self-esteem lead to good grades, or did good grades lead to self-esteem? It turned out that grades in tenth grade predicted self-esteem in twelfth grade, but self-esteem in tenth grade failed to predict grades in twelfth grade. Thus, it seemed, the grades came first, and the self-esteem came afterward.

In another carefully controlled study, Donald Forsyth tried boosting the self-esteem of some of the students in his psychology class at Virginia Commonwealth University. He randomly assigned some students who got a C grade or worse on the midterm to receive a weekly message boosting their self-esteem, and some students with similar grades to get a neutral weekly message. The weekly pep talks presumably helped the students feel better about themselves, but it didn't help their grades—quite to the contrary. When they took the final exam, not only did they do worse than the control group but their grades were even lower than what they'd gotten on the mid-

term. Their average score dropped from 59 to 39—from borderline passing down to hopeless.

Other evidence showed that, across the country, students' self-esteem went up while their performance declined. They just felt better about doing worse. In his own research, Baumeister puzzled over the observation that some people doing truly awful things—like professional hit men and serial rapists—had remarkably high levels of self-esteem.

After reviewing the scientific literature, the panel of psychologists concluded that there is no modern epidemic of low self-esteem, at least not in the United States, Canada, or western Europe. (There's not much known about trends of how people regard themselves in, say, Myanmar.) Most people already feel pretty good about themselves. Children in particular tend to start off with very positive views of themselves. The consensus of the scientific literature happens to jibe with anecdotal evidence from the Baumeister household, where there have been conversations like this:

Daughter (4 years old): I know everything.
Mother: No, honey, you don't know everything.
Daughter: Yes, I do. I know everything.
Mother: You don't know the square root of thirty-six.
Daughter (without batting an eye): I'm keeping all the really big numbers a secret.
Mother: It's not a really big number. It's only six.
Daughter: I knew that.

And this was a child whose parents had *not* attempted to boost her self-esteem.

The review panel also concluded that high self-esteem generally does not make people more effective or easier to get along with. People with high self-esteem think they're more popular, charming, and socially skilled than other people, but objective studies find no differ-

ence. Their self-esteem generally does not lead to better performance at school or at work, and it does not help prevent cigarette smoking, alcohol and drug use, or early sexual behavior. While there may be a correlation between low self-esteem and problems like drug addiction and teenage pregnancy, that doesn't mean that low self-esteem causes these problems. It works the other way: Being a sixteen-year-old pregnant heroin addict can make you feel less than wonderful about yourself.

There seem to be only two clearly demonstrated benefits of high self-esteem, according to the review panel. First, it increases initiative, probably because it lends confidence. People with high self-esteem are more willing to act on their beliefs, to stand up for what they believe in, to approach others, to risk new undertakings. (This unfortunately includes being extra willing to do stupid or destructive things, even when everyone else advises against them.) Second, it feels good. High self-esteem seems to operate like a bank of positive emotions, which furnish a general sense of well-being and can be useful when you need an extra dose of confidence to cope with misfortune, ward off depression, or bounce back from failure. These benefits might be useful to people in some jobs, like sales, by enabling them to recover from frequent rejections, but this sort of persistence is a mixed blessing. It can also lead people to ignore sensible advice as they stubbornly keep wasting time and money on hopeless causes.

On the whole, benefits of high self-esteem accrue to the self while its costs are borne by others, who must deal with side effects like arrogance and conceit. At worst, self-esteem becomes narcissism, the self-absorbed conviction of personal superiority. Narcissists are legends in their own mind and addicted to their grandiose images. They have a deep craving to be admired by other people (but don't feel a special need to be liked—it's adulation they require). They expect to be treated as special beings and will turn nasty when criticized. They tend to make very good first impressions but don't wear well. When the psychologist Delroy Paulhus asked people in groups to rate one

another, the narcissists seemed to be everyone's favorite person, but only during the first few meetings. After a few months, they usually slipped to the bottom of the rankings. God's gift to the world can be hard to live with.

By most measures in psychological studies, narcissism has increased sharply in recent decades, especially among young Americans. College professors often complain that students now feel entitled to high grades without having to study; employers report problems with young workers who expect a quick rise to the top without paying their dues. This trend toward narcissim is even apparent in song lyrics over the past three decades, as a team of researchers led by Nathan DeWall demonstrated in a clever study showing that words like "I" and "me" have become increasingly common in hit songs. Whitney Houston's "Greatest Love of All" has been taken to another level by musicians like Rivers Cuomo, the lead singer of Weezer, who wrote and performed a popular song in 2008 titled "The Greatest Man That Ever Lived." It was autobiographical.

This broad rise in narcissism is the problem child of the self-esteem movement, and it is not likely to change anytime soon, because the movement persists despite the evidence that it's not making children become more successful, honest, or otherwise better citizens. Too many students, parents, and educators are still seduced by the easy promises of self-esteem. Like the students in Forsyth's class in Virginia, when the going gets tough, people with high self-esteem often decide they shouldn't bother. If other people can't appreciate how terrific they are, then it's the other people's problem.

Exceptional Asians

There's one notable exception to the trend toward narcissism observed in psychological studies of young Americans. It doesn't appear among young Asian-Americans, probably because their parents

have been influenced less by the self-esteem movement than by a cultural tradition of instilling discipline. Some Asian cultures put considerably more emphasis on promoting self-control, and from earlier ages, than is common in America and other Western societies. Chinese parents and preschools pressure children quite early in life to become toilet trained and acquire other basic forms of impulse control. By one estimate, two-year-old Chinese children are expected to have levels of control that correspond roughly to what American children reach at age three or four.

A clear difference between Chinese and American toddlers emerges when they're asked to override their natural impulses. In one test, for instance, the toddlers are shown a series of pictures and instructed to say "day" whenever they see the moon, and "night" whenever they see the sun. In other tests, the toddlers try to restrain themselves to a whisper when they're excited, and play a version of Simon Says in which they're supposed to obey one kind of command but ignore another kind. The Chinese four-year-olds generally perform better on these tests than Americans of the same age. The Chinese toddlers' superior self-control might be due in part to genes: There's evidence that the genetic factors associated with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) are much rarer in Chinese children than in American children. But the cultural traditions in China and other Asian countries undoubtedly play an important role in instilling self-discipline, and those traditions in Asian-American homes have contributed to the children's low levels of narcissism as well as their later successes. Asian-Americans make up only 4 percent of the U.S. population but account for a quarter of the student body at elite universities like Stanford, Columbia, and Cornell. They're more likely to get a college degree than any other ethnic group, and they go on to earn salaries that are 25 percent above the American norm.

Their success has led to the popular notion that Asians are more

intelligent than Americans and Europeans, but that's not how James Flynn explains their achievements. After carefully reviewing IQ studies, Flynn concludes that the scores of Chinese-American and Japanese-American people are very similar to whites of European descent. If anything, the Asian-Americans' IQ is slightly lower, on average, although they do show up more at both the upper and lower extremes. The big difference is that they make better use of their intelligence. People working in what Flynn calls elite professions, like physicians, scientists, and accountants, generally have an IQ above a certain threshold. For white Americans, that threshold is an IQ of 110, but Chinese-Americans manage to get the same elite jobs with an IQ of only 103. Moreover, among the people above each threshold, Chinese-Americans have higher rates of actually getting into those jobs, meaning that a Chinese-American with an IQ above 103 is more likely to get an elite job than an American with an IQ above 110. The pattern is similar for Japanese-Americans. By virtue of self-control—hard work, diligence, steadiness, reliability—the children of immigrants from East Asia can do as well as Americans with higher IQs.

Delayed gratification has been a familiar theme in the homes of immigrants like Jae and Dae Kim, who were born in South Korea and raised two daughters in North Carolina. The sisters, Soo and Jane, became a surgeon and a lawyer, respectively, as well as the coauthors of *Top of the Class,* a book about Asian parents' techniques for fostering achievement. They tell how their parents started teaching them the alphabet before their second birthday, and how their mother was never one to reward a child whining for candy at the supermarket. When they reached the checkout counter, before the girls had a chance to beg, Mrs. Kim would preempt them by announcing that if they each read a book the following week, she would buy them a candy bar on the *next* shopping trip. Later, when Soo went off to college and asked her parents for a cheap used car to get

around, they refused but offered to buy her a brand-new car if she was admitted to medical school. Thus, these parents did provide good things for their daughters—but each treat was meted out as a reward for some valued achievement.

The many Asian-American success stories have forced developmental psychologists to revise their theories about proper parenting. They used to warn against the "authoritarian" style, in which parents set rigid goals and enforced strict rules without much overt concern for the child's feelings. Parents were advised to adopt a different style, called "authoritative," in which they still set limits but gave more autonomy and paid more attention to the child's desires. This warmer, more nurturing style was supposed to produce well-adjusted, self-confident children who would do better academically and socially than those from authoritarian homes. But then, as Ruth Chao and other psychologists studied Asian-American families, they noticed that many of the parents set quite strict rules and goals. These immigrants, and often their children, too, considered their style of parenting to be a form of devotion, not oppression. Chinese-American parents were determined to instill self-control by following the Confucian concepts of *chiao shun,* which means "to train," and *guan,* which means both "to govern" and "to love." These parents might have seemed cold and rigid by American standards, but their children were flourishing both in and out of school.

The contrast with American notions showed up in a study of women in the Los Angeles area who were the mothers of toddlers. When asked how parents could contribute to children's academic success, the mothers who had emigrated from China most frequently mentioned setting high goals, enforcing tough standards, and requiring children to do extra homework. Meanwhile, the native-born mothers of European ancestry were determined *not* to put too much pressure on children. They most frequently mentioned the importance of not overemphasizing academic success, of stressing the child's social development, and of promoting the idea that "learning

is fun" and "not something you work at." Another of their chief concerns was promoting the child's self-esteem—a concept of just about no interest to the Chinese mothers in the study, or to Amy Chua, who has become the most outspoken (and entertaining) advocate of what she calls "Chinese parenting" in her bestselling book, *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother.*

Chua's version of parenting—no sleepovers, no playdates—is too extreme for our tastes, particularly the three-hour violin lessons. But we admire her insight into the problems with the self-esteem movement: "As I watched American parents slathering praise on their kids for the lowest of tasks—drawing a squiggle or waving a stick—I came to see that Chinese parents have two things over their Western counterparts: (1) higher dreams for their children, and (2) higher regard for their children in the sense of knowing how much they can take." Chua's basic strategies—set clear goals, enforce rules, punish failure, reward excellence—aren't all that different from the ones being imparted to American homes on *Nanny 911* by Deborah Carroll, the member of the "team of world-class nannies" who gets assigned to the truly hard cases, like the Paul family portrayed in that "Little House of Horrors" episode. In her dealings with American children, Carroll says, she's simply applying the lessons of her own youth in Wales.

"When I was in school," Carroll recalls, "it was such a big thing to get a gold or silver star. It was so important to have a sense that I worked really hard to achieve something. When I ironed my grandfather's shirts, he insisted on paying me because I did it so well—he told me I did it better than my grandmother, and I loved that feeling of accomplishment. That's where your self-esteem comes from, not from being told you're the greatest." Like Amy Chua and the Kims in North Carolina and so many other Asian immigrants, Nanny Deb independently arrived at the same educational conclusions as the Association for Psychological Science's review panel: Forget about self-esteem. Work on self-control.