



STYLIST

FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Did you grow up with a narcissistic parent? The two types of 'peacock parent' and how to spot them

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Anyone who grew up with a narcissistic parent knows just how the impact can extend long into adulthood, but did you know there are two types of 'peacock parent' or mothers and fathers with harmful narcissistic tendencies? Here, the psychotherapist Kathleen Saxton who coined the term explains how to recognise each type and how to deal with their effects

We're all somebody's child. No matter our culture, class, age or where we live, we all came into this world hoping that our parents would forever offer us a place of acceptance, encouragement and love. We want to feel that we can safely show our caregivers our true selves, revealing our hopes and triumphs as well as our defeats and wounds.

In reality, however, not everyone has the good fortune to be raised by parents who nurture and care for them. Through my work as a psychotherapist, I know it's not unusual for parents to psychologically abuse their children - whether that's through coercive control, verbal bullying, emotional neglect, psychological manipulation or other forms of harm. These kinds of abuse may occur in varied combinations and are often hidden in plain sight within middle-class families.

Increasingly, experts in my field are recognising a correlation between these kinds of abusive behaviours and a parent being diagnosed with (or showing deep traits of) a narcissistic personality. The signs of narcissistic parenting can initially be difficult to detect, but the emotional impact is pervasive and profoundly damaging. Having worked with many adult clients who come to therapy to explore the effects of having a narcissistic caregiver, I've found myself using the term 'peacock parents' to describe this experience.

It can be hard for those outside the family to recognise peacock parenting - and almost impossible for children inside the family to make sense of the damaging behaviours they experience. But if you think you may have been raised by a narcissistic parent, understanding the dynamics at play is often the first step towards healing as an adult.

What are the two types of narcissistic parents?

A grandiose narcissistic parent demands admiration - utilising colourful and spectacular displays to dazzle those they wish to impress. This works to distract from their true persona, which is often controlling, domineering, arrogant, entitled and lacking in empathy. These peacock parents often dominate conversations, dismiss their child's feelings and make everything about themselves.

These parents expect their children to reflect their greatness and may be overly critical when their expectations aren't met. Success is paramount while failure isn't tolerated, leading children to feel immense pressure to perform to gain approval. One of their children may be selected as their 'golden child', whose beautiful feathers will be championed and paraded. Other children who don't support the parent's desired image may be treated as lost causes or scapegoats, whose role is to be neglected, chastised or belittled - including through mocking humour.

“Children raised by narcissists often carry emotional scars”

Unlike their grandiose counterparts, covert narcissistic parents appear more introverted and fragile. Imagine a shy peacock that seems safe to approach. But they manipulate through guilt and victimhood, often overtly talking about duty and the sacrifices they have made for their children. A covert narcissist parent will work hard to make their children feel sorry for them. They may be passive-aggressive, withholding love or affection unless the child meets their emotional needs. Silent treatment, ignoring and threatening mental collapse are common behaviours.

I've had clients whose parents were so determined to gain attention and sympathy, they feigned illness, fabricated accidents or claimed that the client's academic or sporting success was all down to their own sacrifices. Children, in turn, are left feeling anxiously responsible for their parents' emotions - and guilty if they ask for attention, time or something for themselves.

The lingering effects of peacock parenting

Children raised by narcissistic parents often carry emotional and psychological scars well into adulthood. The impact of this upbringing tends to manifest differently depending on whether the parent was grandiose or covert.

The children of grandiose narcissists often develop anxiety disorders and become enmeshed with their parent to 'survive' or receive attention. They may struggle with a lack of identity and constant self-doubt, believing that their worth is based purely on their achievements - leading to perfectionism, a fear of failure and a chronic sense of not being 'good enough'.

If they become triangulated with their siblings (competing to reach the coveted position of being the favoured child), the children of grandiose narcissistic parents can develop hypervigilance and people-pleasing behaviours. Having experienced manipulation and conditional love, they may also struggle to trust in their relationships outside the family unit or feel ashamed of their emotions, becoming detached or avoidant.

Children of covert narcissistic parents may also experience emotional enmeshment, but for different reasons. Having been their peacock parent's constant source of validation - possibly even a quasi-partner at times - they may struggle to 'leave home'. They will often develop low self-esteem and a fear of the future.

Their sense of self becomes intertwined with taking care of others, and they will often feel responsible for managing other people's emotions, abandoning their own needs in the process. Emotional repression is also common among adults who were taught as children that their emotions didn't matter as much as their parents' emotions.

Whether a person was raised by a grandiose or covert narcissistic parent, the experience may affect their romantic relationships in adulthood. In my therapy room, I often see adult children of peacock parents who seek validation from partners rather than feeling secure within themselves. They may struggle with anxious or avoidant attachment styles (often displayed as a fear of abandonment or intimacy) and find it difficult to set boundaries. They tend to be too accepting of toxic behaviour - normalising manipulation, control or emotional unavailability and being overly accommodating or shutting down to protect themselves.

The good news is that being raised by a peacock parent doesn't mean you're doomed to repeat the cycle. Recognising these patterns is the first step forwards. Therapy, self-reflection, education and validation can empower individuals to build healthier relationships and reclaim their autonomy. Understanding the long-term impact of peacock parents is crucial - not just for personal healing, but to prevent these dynamics from passing to future generations.

