CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Child Development, November/December 2017, Volume 88, Number 6, Pages 1799–1809

The title for this Special Section is **Origins of Children's Self-Views,** edited by Eddie Brummelman and Sander Thomaes

# When Parents' Praise Inflates, Children's Self-Esteem Deflates

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Western parents often give children overly positive, inflated praise. One perspective holds that inflated praise sets unattainable standards for children, eventually lowering children's self-esteem (self-deflation hypothesis). Another perspective holds that children internalize inflated praise to form narcissistic self-views (self-inflation hypothesis). These perspectives were tested in an observational-longitudinal study (120 parent–child dyads from the Netherlands) in late childhood (ages 7–11), when narcissism and self-esteem first emerge. Supporting the self-deflation hypothesis, parents' inflated praise predicted lower self-esteem in children. Partly supporting the self-inflation hypothesis, parents' inflated praise predicted higher narcissism—but only in children with high self-esteem. Noninflated praise predicted neither self-esteem nor narcissism. Thus, inflated praise may foster the self-views it seeks to prevent.

"*Terrific*!" "Your drawing is *amazing*!" "You did *incredibly* well at this!" In current Western society, parents often give their children overly positive, inflated praise. About 25% of parents' praise is inflated (Brummelman, Thomaes, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, & Bushman, 2014). Parents may believe that by inflating their praise, they raise their children's self-esteem (Damon, 1995). Does inflated praise actually succeed in raising children's self-esteem? Or does it ironically backfire, and foster low self-esteem or even narcissism? To address these questions, we conducted an observational-longitudinal study in late childhood—the age at which individual differences in self-esteem and narcissism first emerge.

## *Praise to Raise Self-Esteem*

Since the self-esteem movement emerged in the 1970s, Western society has become increasingly concerned with building children's self-esteem (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Indeed, adults from Western countries view low self-esteem in children as a pervasive and worrisome problem (Thomaes, Brummelman, Bushman, Reijntjes, & Orobio de Castro, 2016) and are motivated to cure it through praise. Self-esteem interventions often rely on praise as one of their key components (O'Mara, Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 2006), and self-help books recommend parents to build children's self-esteem by praising them (e.g., Talbot, 2009). Unsurprisingly, parents have internalized this belief. In one study, 87% of parents believed that children need praise in order to feel good about themselves (Brummelman & Thomaes, 2011).

Not all praise is alike, however. A large body of literature shows that praise comes in different shapes and sizes, with some more effective than others (for overviews, see Dweck, 2006; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). For example, when children are praised for success at

This research was supported by The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (grant 431-09-022).

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 0009-3920/2017/8806-0004
DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12936

easy rather than difficult tasks, they may infer that they lack ability (e.g., "If you praise me for something this easy, you must think I can't do much better"; Barker & Graham, 1987). In addition, when children are praised for their ability (e.g., "You're so smart!") rather than their effort (e.g., "You worked so hard!"), they may infer that ability is a fixed, unchangeable trait (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Consequently, they avoid challenging tasks; and when they fail, they infer lack of ability. Thus, subtle differences in praise can have considerable impact on children.

When parents want to raise children's self-esteem, they might be especially likely to rely on overly positive, inflated praise (Brummelman, Crocker, & Bushman, 2016). Instead of telling children that they did well, they might tell them that they did *incredibly* well. Instead of telling children that their drawing is nice, they might tell them that their drawing is *amazing*. People often use such extreme language in an attempt to persuade others (Hamilton & Hunter, 1998). Thus, parents may believe that by inflating their praise, they may persuade their children into feeling better about themselves. Accordingly, parents direct inflated praise particularly at those who seem to need it the most: children with low self-esteem (Brummelman et al., 2014).

### *Self-Inflation or Self-Deflation?*

Does inflated praise succeed in raising children's self-esteem? Perhaps not. Although direct empirical evidence is lacking, psychologists have theorized that inflated praise may backfire. The *self-deflation hypothesis* states that inflated praise may lead children to develop lower—not higher—levels of self-esteem (Brummelman, Crocker, et al., 2016). According to this perspective, parents often give inflated praise to children with low self-esteem in an attempt to raise their self-esteem. Rather than raising self-esteem, however, inflated praise conveys to children that they should continue to meet very high standards (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). When children are told that they performed incredibly well, they may infer that they should perform incredibly well all the time (Baumeister, Hutton, & Cairns, 1990; Kanouse, Gumpert, & Canavan-Gumpert, 1981; Ryan, 1982). Struggles and setbacks are inevitable, so children may eventually fall short of the standards set for them and therefore feel down about themselves. Thus, parents' inflated praise may ironically lower children's self-esteem over time.

By contrast, the *self-inflation hypothesis* states that inflated praise does not lower self-esteem but rather cultivates narcissism in children. According to this perspective, children use feedback from others to form views of themselves; more specifically, they come to see themselves as they believe they are seen by others (Cooley, 1902; Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998; Mead, 1934; Thomaes et al., 2010). When children are told that they performed incredibly well, they may infer that they are extraordinary—a core feature of the trait of narcissism (Millon, 1969; Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Young-Eisendrath, 2008). Once children believe they are extraordinary, they try to maintain this view of themselves by trying to garner external validation (Brummelman, Thomaes, & Sedikides, 2016; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Indeed, narcissism is characterized by cravings for respect and admiration from others (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001). Thus, inflated praise from parents may encourage core narcissistic traits in children.

At first blush, the self-inflation and self-deflation hypotheses may seem contradictory. They are, however, complementary, as narcissism and self-esteem are distinct dimensions of the self (Brummelman, Thomaes, et al., 2016). In fact, narcissism and self-esteem are virtually uncorrelated in childhood (Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016). Narcissistic children can be low in self-esteem, and children with high self-esteem can be low in narcissism. This contradicts the popular view that narcissism is an exaggerated form of self-esteem.

How do narcissism and self-esteem differ? Narcissistic children feel superior to others, believe they are entitled to privileges, and want to be admired by others (Campbell & Miller, 2011; Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016). When they get the admiration they want, they feel on top of the world; but when they do not, they want to sink into the ground. Narcissists often respond to such humiliation by lashing out angrily and aggressively (Thomaes, Bushman, Stegge, & Olthof, 2008). By contrast, children with high self-esteem are happy with themselves as a person but do not see themselves as superior to others (Harter, 2012). As Morris Rosenberg (1965) said, "When we deal with self-esteem, we are asking whether the individual considers himself adequate—a person of worth—not whether he considers himself superior to others" (p. 62). Rather than seeking admiration, children with high self-esteem want to establish deep and intimate bonds with others (Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, Olthof, & Denissen, 2008). They rarely explode in angry and aggressive outbursts (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005) and are at reduced risk for anxiety and depression (Sowislo & Orth, 2013). Thus, although narcissism entails unhealthy feelings of superiority, self-esteem entails healthy feelings of worth.

### *Present Study*

The present observational-longitudinal study investigated, for the first time, the self-inflation and self-deflation hypotheses. At baseline, we assessed children's narcissism and self-esteem levels. Five weeks later, we conducted in-home observations of parent–child interactions to code parents' inflated and noninflated praise. We then followed up on children's narcissism and self-esteem levels for three additional, 6-monthly waves.

The study was timed in the critical phase of late childhood (ages 7–11), when individual differences in narcissism and self-esteem first emerge (Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016). Children this age have acquired the cognitive capacities to form global self-evaluations (Harter, 2012), which underlie self-esteem and narcissism. Also, they use social comparisons to evaluate themselves (Ruble & Frey, 1991), enabling narcissistic self-views: "I'm better than others!" In addition, children this age readily use praise to evaluate themselves and to form standards for their future performance (Dweck, 2002), which makes praise especially salient to them.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 120 children (50% girls; ages 7–11 at baseline; $M = 8.86$, $SD = 0.85$; 87% of Dutch origin) and their parent (88% mothers; ages 30–62 at baseline; $M = 43.29$, $SD = 4.12$; 97% of Dutch origin) recruited through public elementary schools serving lower-to-upper middleclass communities in the Netherlands. Of all parents who were contacted, 56% provided active informed consent for themselves and for their child and participated in the study. The parents self-identified as the child's primary caregiver. All the children gave their own assent. In a previous article, we reported the correlation between children's self-esteem at Wave 1 and parents' inflated praise (Brummelman et al., 2014, study 2). For the present research, we followed up on these children for three additional waves, assessing both their self-esteem and their narcissism levels. Data were collected from autumn 2011 to spring 2013.

### *Procedure and Materials*

In each of four 6-monthly waves, children completed questionnaires in their classrooms at school. During the assessments, nonparticipating classmates worked on their regular schoolwork, independently and in silence. Narcissism was assessed using the 10-item Childhood Narcissism Scale (Thomaes, Stegge, et al., 2008). Sample items include: "I think it's important to stand out" and "I am a very special person" (0 = *not at all true* to 3 = *completely true*; Cronbach's $\alpha$ range for Waves 1–4 = .69–.84). We assessed narcissism as a normal or everyday personality trait on which youth and adults in the general population vary (Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016). Self-esteem was assessed using the six-item Global Self-Worth Subscale of the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985). Sample items include: "Some kids are happy with themselves as a person" and "Some kids like the kind of person they are" (0 = *I am not like these kids at all* to 3 = *I am exactly like these kids*; Cronbach's $\alpha$ range for Waves 1–4 = .78–.84). For both scales, responses were averaged across items, with higher scores indicating higher narcissism and self-esteem levels, respectively.

An average of 5 weeks (36 days) after Wave 1, children and their parent participated in one in-home observation. Parents were asked to administer 12 mathematics exercises to their child (i.e., Exercises 5–16 from the Arithmetic subtest of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children–III; Wechsler, 1991). Using a stopwatch and score sheet, parents judged whether the child correctly completed each exercise within 30 s. Parents were not allowed to help the child complete the exercises. Research assistants left the room until the exercises were completed.

The sessions were videotaped. Two independent trained coders, blind to variation in children's level of narcissism and self-esteem, counted the number of times parents gave their child inflated and noninflated praise. We defined praise as spoken positive evaluations of the child's traits, actions, or products (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002; Kanouse et al., 1981). Consistent with previous research (Brummelman et al., 2014), praise was considered inflated when it contained an adverb (e.g., *extremely, incredibly*) or adjective (e.g., *amazing, fantastic*) signaling a very positive evaluation. Both coders assessed all parent–child dyads. Intercoder agreement was high (Cohen's $\kappa = .98$). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion between coders.

### *Longitudinal Analyses*

Due to camera failure, videos of four parent–child dyads were unavailable, causing these dyads to have missing values on praise. Due to attrition,

some children had missing values on narcissism and self-esteem (2, 5, 12, and 13 children on Waves 1–4, respectively). Little's Missing Completely at Random test produced a normed $\chi^2$ ($\chi^2/df$) of 0.93, $\chi^2(62) = 57.787$, $p = .628$, indicating that data were missing at random. Missing values were handled with full-information maximum likelihood.

We conducted path analyses in M*plus* version 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2015) to examine longitudinal associations between praise (inflated, noninflated) and self-views (narcissism, self-esteem). We conducted separate analyses for inflated and noninflated praise, as well as for narcissism and self-esteem. The models included 1-wave and 2-wave stability paths for narcissism and self-esteem; paths from narcissism and self-esteem at Wave 1 to inflated and noninflated praise; and paths from inflated or noninflated praise to narcissism and self-esteem at Waves 2, 3, and 4. To create parsimonious models, all longitudinal parameters were constrained to be time invariant (Kline, 2005). Freeing parameters of interest (i.e., longitudinal paths from praise to later self-views) did not significantly improve fit of any of the models.

We kept an interval between Wave 1 and the in-home observations to examine whether children's self-views would predict subsequent parental praise. We, therefore, modeled the paths from self-views (narcissism, self-esteem) at Wave 1 to praise (inflated, noninflated) as direct effects rather than as correlations. Modeling them as correlations did not change any of our findings. For one parent–child dyad, the in-home observation was inadvertently scheduled before (rather than after) Wave 1. Because excluding this dyad did not change any of our findings, we retained it in our analyses.

### *Indirect Effects*

We tested indirect effects using M*plus* bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (Hayes & Scharkow, 2013; MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004) with 10,000 bootstrap draws.

### *Moderation*

The consequences of praise may differ between children with high and low self-esteem (Brummelman et al., 2014). We, therefore, explored whether children's self-esteem at Wave 1 moderated the longitudinal paths from praise (inflated, noninflated) to subsequent self-views (narcissism, self-esteem) by including an interaction between Wave 1 self-esteem and praise (inflated, noninflated). All terms were centered before computing the interactions.

### *Model Fit*

Model fit was assessed with the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) and 90% confidence interval (CI), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). CFI values $\geq .90$, RMSEA values $\leq .08$, and SRMR values $< .10$ indicate acceptable model fit, whereas CFI values $\geq .95$, RMSEA values $\leq .05$, and SRMR values $< .08$ indicate good model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2005; Muthén, 2004). The comparative fit between nested models was tested with chi-square difference tests.

## Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are displayed in Table 1. Narcissism and self-esteem were virtually uncorrelated, both within and across waves, attesting to their conceptual independence. Frequencies of inflated and noninflated praise were similarly uncorrelated.

We first tested the self-inflation and self-deflation hypotheses, respectively. After testing each hypothesis, we explored whether the effects of praise were moderated by children's initial level of self-esteem. Goodness-of-fit statistics are displayed in Table 2.

### *Self-Deflation Hypothesis*

We first tested the self-deflation hypothesis, which holds that parents' inflated praise predicts lower self-esteem in children. The fully constrained baseline model demonstrated good fit to the data. Freeing longitudinal paths (i.e., paths from inflated praise to later self-esteem) did not significantly improve model fit.

Self-esteem at Wave 1 predicted inflated praise: Children with lower levels of self-esteem at Wave 1 received more inflated praise ($b$ [95% CI] = −0.794 [−1.530, −0.099], $\beta = -0.224$). Inflated praise, in turn, predicted lower self-esteem at Waves 2, 3, and 4 ($b$ [95% CI] = −0.029 [−0.052, −0.007], $\beta$s = −0.103 to −0.119). Importantly, the indirect path was significant: Self-esteem at Wave 1 predicted lower self-esteem at Waves 2, 3, and 4 partly *through* inflated praise ($b$ [95% CI] = 0.023 [0.003, 0.063]; Figure 1).

We then tested whether children's self-esteem at Wave 1 moderated the paths from inflated praise to later self-esteem (Waves 2–4). Constraining the

Table 1
*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

| | | *n* | *M* | *SD* | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Inflated praise | 116 | 1.59 | 2.14 | −.03 | −.02 | −.23* | −.14 | −.36** | −.33** | .01 | .10 | .12 | −.00 |
| 2. | Noninflated praise | 116 | 4.72 | 3.36 | — | −.05 | −.14 | −.11 | .03 | −.07 | .11 | .15 | .03 | .11 |
| 3. | Performance | 116 | 11.07 | 1.05 | | — | .23* | .26** | .05 | .01 | −.18 | −.00 | −.02 | −.09 |
| 4. | W1 self-esteem | 118 | 2.12 | 0.61 | | | — | .46** | .49** | .45** | −.02 | .09 | .08 | .12 |
| 5. | W2 self-esteem | 115 | 2.21 | 0.59 | | | | — | .64** | .57** | −.10 | .05 | −.13 | −.01 |
| 6. | W3 self-esteem | 108 | 2.29 | 0.53 | | | | | — | .72** | .09 | .07 | .05 | .19 |
| 7. | W4 self-esteem | 107 | 2.32 | 0.53 | | | | | | — | .06 | .00 | .03 | .21* |
| 8. | W1 narcissism | 118 | 1.08 | 0.47 | | | | | | | — | .44** | .51** | .49** |
| 9. | W2 narcissism | 115 | 1.02 | 0.52 | | | | | | | | — | .66** | .60** |
| 10. | W3 narcissism | 108 | 0.97 | 0.52 | | | | | | | | | — | .71** |
| 11. | W4 narcissism | 107 | 1.07 | 0.52 | | | | | | | | | | — |

*Note.* W1–W4 = Wave 1–Wave 4. Performance = the number of correct answers on the mathematics exercises.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

moderation effects to be equal over time did not significantly worsen model fit. The fully constrained moderation model demonstrated good fit to the data. Children's self-esteem at Wave 1 did not moderate the longitudinal paths from inflated praise to self-esteem at Wave 2, 3, and 4 ($b$ [95% CI] = 0.012 [−0.023, 0.048]).

Thus, supporting the self-deflation hypothesis, children with lower self-esteem received more inflated praise from their parents. Parents' inflated praise, in turn, predicted lower self-esteem in children over time, regardless of whether children started out with high or low self-esteem.

### *Self-Inflation Hypothesis*

Next, we tested the self-inflation hypothesis, which holds that parents' inflated praise predicts higher narcissism in children. The fully constrained baseline model demonstrated good fit to the data. Freeing longitudinal paths (i.e., paths from inflated praise to later narcissism) did not significantly improve model fit.

Narcissism at Wave 1 did not predict inflated praise ($b$ [95% CI] = 0.034 [−0.846, 1.009], $\beta = 0.007$) nor did inflated praise predict narcissism at Waves 2, 3, and 4 ($b$ [95% CI] = 0.003 [−0.016, 0.025], $\beta = 0.013$; Figure 1). Consequently, there were no significant indirect effects from narcissism at Wave 1 to narcissism at later waves through inflated praise ($b$ [95% CI] = 0.000 [−0.009, 0.011]).

We then tested whether children's self-esteem at Wave 1 moderated the paths from inflated praise to later narcissism (Waves 2–4). Constraining the moderation effects to be equal over time did not significantly worsen model fit. The fully constrained moderation model demonstrated good fit to the data.

The moderation was significant ($b$ [95% CI] = 0.044 [0.019, 0.072]). Inflated praise predicted higher narcissism among children with high self-esteem ($M + 1\ SD$) at Wave 1 ($b$ [95% CI] = 0.041 [0.015, 0.073]) but not among children with low ($M - 1\ SD$) or average self-esteem at Wave 1 ($b$ [95% CI] = −0.012 [−0.037, 0.010] and $b$ [95% CI] = 0.014 [−0.005, 0.036]), respectively.

Thus, partly supporting the self-inflation hypothesis, parents' inflated praise predicted higher narcissism but only in children with high initial levels of self-esteem.

### *Auxiliary Analyses*

#### *Specificity*

To examine the specificity of our findings, we repeated all analyses for noninflated praise (see Supporting Information). Neither self-esteem nor narcissism at Wave 1 predicted parents' noninflated praise, nor did parents' noninflated praise predict later self-esteem or narcissism. Also, none of the longitudinal paths (i.e., paths from noninflated praise to later self-esteem or narcissism) were moderated by children's self-esteem at Wave 1. Thus, our findings are specific to inflated praise and do not generalize to noninflated praise.

#### *Robustness*

To examine the robustness of our findings, we repeated all analyses with children's sex, age, and performance (i.e., the number of correct answers on

Table 2
*Goodness-of-Fit Statistics of Longitudinal Models Involving Self-Esteem, Narcissism, and Inflated Praise*

| Models | $\chi^2(df)$ | CFI | RMSEA [90% CI] | SRMR | $\Delta\chi^2(df)$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Inflated praise and self-esteem | | | | | |
| Baseline, constrained | 5.187 (6) | 1.000 | .000 [.000, .110] | .070 | — |
| Baseline, unconstrained | 3.260 (4) | 1.000 | .000 [.000, .127] | .066 | 1.93 (2) |
| Moderation, constrained | 4.975 (7) | 1.000 | .000 [.000, .090] | .040 | — |
| Moderation, unconstrained | 1.518 (5) | 1.000 | .000 [.000, .049] | .020 | 3.46 (2) |
| Inflated praise and narcissism | | | | | |
| Baseline, constrained | 7.057 (6) | .994 | .039 [.000, .130] | .040 | — |
| Baseline, unconstrained | 2.435 (4) | 1.000 | .000 [.000, .110] | .022 | 4.62 (2) |
| Moderation, constrained | 16.678 (13) | .980 | .049 [.000, .109] | .054 | — |
| Moderation, unconstrained | 14.953 (11) | .979 | .055 [.000, .119] | .053 | 1.73 (2) |

*Note.* Baseline models include no interactions. Moderation models include an interaction between Wave 1 self-esteem and inflated praise. Constrained models include time-invariant longitudinal parameters. Unconstrained models include time-variant longitudinal parameters. CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean squared error of approximation; 90% CI = 90% confidence interval; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; $\Delta\chi^2$ = Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square difference test, comparing the fit of constrained and unconstrained models; all $\Delta\chi^2$ tests were nonsignificant, *p*s > .099.

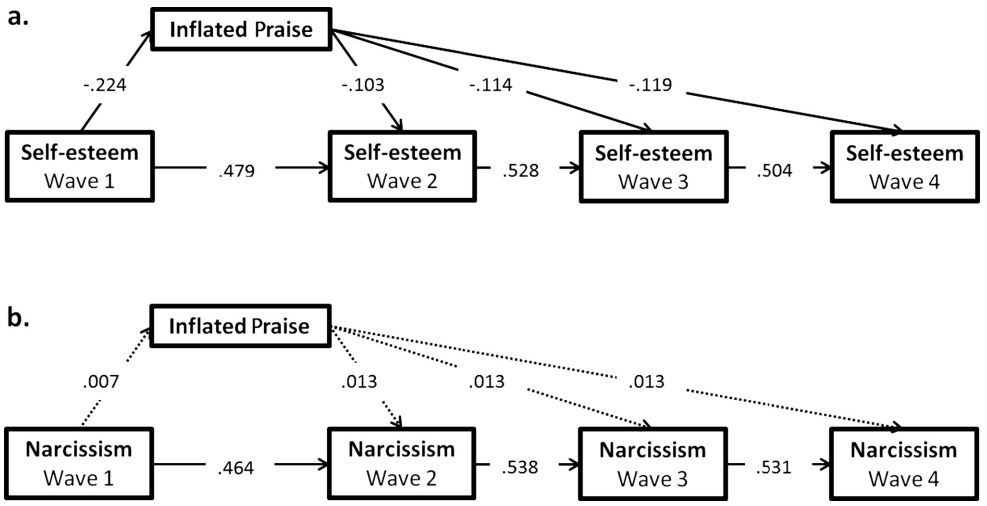


*Figure 1.* Standardized associations (βs) between parents' inflated praise and children's self-esteem (a) and narcissism (b). Solid lines represent significant associations; dotted lines represent nonsignificant associations. Children's self-esteem at Wave 1 predicted more inflated praise from parents, which in turn predicted lower self-esteem at Waves 2, 3, and 4. Children's narcissism at Wave 1 did not predict inflated praise from parents, nor did inflated praise predict narcissism at Waves 2, 3, or 4.

the mathematics exercises) as time-invariant covariates (see Supporting Information). These variables did not predict inflated praise, noninflated praise, narcissism, or self-esteem in any of the models, nor did including them as covariates affect any of the longitudinal paths from praise to later self-views. This attests to the robustness of our findings.

## Discussion

Does praising children in inflated ways help them develop higher self-esteem, as conventional wisdom says it does? We addressed this question in an observational-longitudinal study timed in the critical phase of late childhood. Consistent with the self-deflation hypothesis, parents' inflated praise predicted lower—not higher—self-esteem in children over time. Partly consistent with the self-inflation hypothesis, parents' inflated praise predicted higher narcissism over time but only in children with high initial levels of self-esteem. Attesting to the specificity of these findings, they did not emerge for parents' moderately positive, noninflated praise. Together, these findings challenge conventional wisdom and show that inflated praise

can have unintended consequences for children's self-development.

### *Theoretical Implications*

Parents gave more inflated praise to children with lower self-esteem; parents' inflated praise, in turn, predicted lower self-esteem over time. Strikingly, children's initial low self-esteem predicted subsequent low self-esteem *through* eliciting inflated praise from parents. These findings support the transactional model of praise (Brummelman, Crocker, et al., 2016), which holds that parents' well-meant attempts to counteract children's low self-esteem by praising them in inflated ways can backfire. By giving inflated praise, parents may inadvertently pressure children to continue to display exceptional performance, thereby eventually lowering children's self-esteem in the face of inevitable struggles and setbacks. Lowered self-esteem, in turn, may inspire parents to give even more inflated praise, thus potentially establishing a self-sustaining downward spiral.

More broadly, these findings emphasize the need for a transactional perspective on praise (Brummelman, Crocker, et al., 2016). To date, praise has been studied primarily as a unidirectional process, with children as passive recipients of the praise. Consistent with transactional models of the self (Crocker & Brummelman, in press) and development (Sameroff & MacKenzie, 2003), whereas our findings show that children are not passive recipients of praise. They actively shape the praise they receive, which in turn shapes them. Such transactions cannot be revealed by studying merely the effects of praise on the child; they can be revealed only by studying transactions between the child and the environment (e.g., studying how children are praised by their parents, how the praise affects them, and how this feeds back into parents' ways of praising them).

Are there alternative explanations for why parents' inflated praise predicted lower self-esteem in children? Previous work shows that praising children for success at easy tasks can lower self-perceived competence (Graham, 1990; Meyer, 1992). Indeed, adults typically praise children who work hard (Weiner & Kukla, 1970). So when children are praised for success at an easy task, they may infer that the praiser thinks they did not have the ability to succeed without working so hard (Graham, 1990; Meyer, 1992). This may not fully explain our findings, however. First, in our study, children's task was not explicitly labeled as "easy." Second, parents' inflated praise predicted lower self-esteem regardless of children's age and performance (see Supporting Information), even though older and better-performing children presumably found the task relatively easy. A more likely interpretation of our findings, therefore, is that inflated praise sets unattainable standards for children. This may not lower children's self-esteem instantly (Brummelman et al., 2014) but only over time, when children encounter inevitable struggles and setbacks that make them realize they are unable to meet the standards set for them (Brummelman, Crocker, et al., 2016).

Our findings raise the question: Why did inflated praise predict higher narcissism only in children with high self-esteem? Social-judgment theory (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Wood, Perunovic, & Lee, 2009) holds that people compare persuasive messages (e.g., praise) with their current attitudes (e.g., self-esteem) and internalize only those messages that are close to their current attitudes: messages that fall within their latitude of acceptance. Thus, children with high and low self-esteem may feel similarly pressured by inflated praise to continue to display excellent performance. Yet only those with high self-esteem may internalize the praise to form narcissistic self-views (e.g., "Yes, indeed, I am incredible"). Those with low self-esteem may judge the praise as falling outside of their latitude of acceptance (e.g., "I'm not that incredible"). Thus, children internalize praise only when the praise does not clash with their current views of themselves.

Our study extends existing longitudinal research on the consequences of praise (Gunderson et al., 2013; Pomerantz & Kempner, 2013). It is the first longitudinal study on inflated praise, a type of praise that has rarely been studied empirically (Brummelman et al., 2014). Even though the difference between inflated and noninflated praise can be subtle, it matters for children's self-development. In our study, parents' inflated praise predicted children's lower self-esteem and higher narcissism, but their noninflated praise did not. Unlike inflated praise, noninflated praise does not entail an overly positive evaluation; it neither pressures children to perform extraordinarily well nor conveys to them that they are extraordinary individuals. Our findings, therefore, do not imply that parents should stop praising children altogether; they imply that parents should be careful not to praise children in inflated ways.

Additionally, our study is the first to examine whether praise may cultivate narcissism. Psychologists often fear that praise inadvertently breeds narcissism in children (Baumeister et al., 2003; Millon,

1969; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Direct empirical evidence was lacking, however. Our study demonstrates that praise does predict higher narcissism but only if phrased in an inflated way and directed at children with high self-esteem. More broadly, our findings resonate with the finding that narcissism is cultivated by *parental overvaluation*—parents seeing their child as an extraordinary and entitled individual, who have been shown to praise their child frequently (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015; Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, et al., 2015). However, overvaluing parents do not seem to praise with the purpose of raising their child's self-esteem; rather, they do so with the purpose of making their child (and, by association, themselves) stand out. Indeed, overvaluing parents have narcissistic traits; they are ego-involved in their child's performances and want to bask in the child's reflected glory (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015; also see Grolnick, Gurland, DeCourcey, & Jacob, 2002). Thus, praising their child may represent a concealed attempt to put themselves on a pedestal.

### *Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions*

Strengths of this study include its combination of in-home observations and longitudinal follow-ups, its timing in late childhood, its parsing of inflated and noninflated praise, and its assessment of both self-esteem and narcissism. Our study also has limitations. First, we assessed praise at a single point in time. To examine whether parents' inflated praise and children's low self-esteem indeed establish a self-sustaining downward spiral (Brummelman, Crocker, et al., 2016), future research should assess both praise and self-esteem repeatedly over time. Second, we argued that inflated praise lowers children's self-esteem by putting pressure on them to achieve very high standards, but we did not assess those perceived standards. Future research should examine whether children's perceived standards (e.g., "My father [mother] expects me to perform exceptionally well all the time") mediate the adverse effects of inflated praise on self-esteem. Such perceived standards should be distinguished from performance goals, which are more narrowly defined as goals to demonstrate one's ability (Ames & Archer, 1988). Third, our study was conducted in the Netherlands, a Western country. Parents from non-Western cultures, such as China, rarely praise their children (Ng, Pomerantz, & Lam, 2007). Because non-Western parents place little value on self-esteem (Miller, Wang, Sandel, & Cho, 2002), they may be especially unlikely to praise their children in inflated ways. Future research should examine whether inflated praise is indeed more common in Western than non-Western countries.

Our study also generates novel research directions. One direction is to examine how parents gauge children's level of self-esteem to attune their praise accordingly. Do parents infer low self-esteem from children's self-directed talk (e.g., "I'm no good . . ."), body language (e.g., collapsed posture), or confidence (e.g., their confidence in trying new tasks)? Do parents attune their praise deliberately, or does this happen automatically and outside of their conscious awareness? Addressing these questions will inform interventions about how to effectively redirect parents' praise. Another direction is to refine existing self-esteem interventions. Self-esteem interventions are often universal (i.e., targeting children in the general population, rather than at-risk subgroups) and often rely on praise (O'Mara et al., 2006). Given our finding that inflated praise predicts lower self-esteem in the general population, self-esteem interventions may increase their effectiveness by relying on moderately positive, noninflated praise rather than overly positive, inflated praise.

More broadly, future research should try to identify parenting practices that effectively raise children's self-esteem. Parents often attempt to raise children's self-esteem directly through praise (Brummelman, Crocker, et al., 2016). However, in our study, neither inflated nor inflated praise was effective in raising self-esteem, perhaps because praise is ultimately a judgment. As one expert put it, "the most notable aspect of a positive judgment is not that it is positive but that it is a judgment" (Kohn, 1993, p. 102). When children are praised frequently, they may start to judge themselves through the eyes of others—a process that does not lead to a stable and secure sense of worth (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kernis, 2003). It may be more effective to raise children's self-esteem indirectly, such as by building warm relationships with them (e.g., sharing joy with them, cuddling with them, and showing interest in their activities), which makes them feel accepted and valued (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, et al., 2015). When children feel accepted and valued, they may gradually internalize the perception of themselves as worthy individuals (Brummelman, Thomaes, et al., 2016).

### *Conclusion*

Raising children's self-esteem has become one of the main parenting goals in Western society (Baumeister et al., 2003; Heine et al., 1999). This is not surprising given that self-esteem contributes to children's success and well-being (Orth & Robins, 2014). However, in their well-meant efforts to raise self-esteem, parents often give children overly positive, inflated praise. Our study shows that, rather than raising self-esteem, inflated praise may cultivate lower self-esteem and higher narcissism in children. Thus, what seems like common sense can lead parents to rely on types of praise that ironically backfire.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

**Data S1.** Specificity Analyses, Robustness Analyses, and Moderation Analyses