EVERY AGE DEVELOPS its own peculiar forms of pathology, which express in exaggerated form its underlying character structure,” the historian and social critic Christopher Lasch wrote in *The Culture of Narcissism*. For Lasch, writing in 1979, that character structure was an unrelenting narcissism, one that threatened to undermine the rugged individualism of previous eras and, quite possibly, liberalism itself. His book “describes a way of life that is dying,” he wrote in the introduction, “the culture of competitive individualism, which in its decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of all against all, [and] the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self.”

Critics promptly judged Lasch’s work a jeremiad (albeit a best-selling one), an erudite but extreme lament about the state of the culture that was

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Christine Rosen

astute in pointing out the development of certain tendencies among Americans but far too pessimistic about the future of liberalism. Those optimists assessed the American and found an individualistic, competitive specimen who had, in recent years, become appropriately more attuned to the need for self-care and an enriched self-esteem. Lasch, by contrast, looked at the American and found him peering into a mirror, anxiously rating the figure staring back at him and wondering how to combat the inexplicable emptiness he felt. As for the causes of this new narcissism, Lasch placed the blame on “quite specific changes in our society and culture — from bureaucracy, the proliferation of images, therapeutic ideologies, the rationalization of the inner life, the cult of consumption, and in the last analysis from changes in family life and from changing patterns of socialization.”

Although it is true that Lasch allowed himself to make sweeping generalizations about the quality of the American character, The Culture of Narcissism has nevertheless remained one of the more useful critiques of late twentieth-century American life and has outlived the feverish criticism it once spawned. The book challenged many of the core assumptions that elites and non-elites blithely accepted as facts at the time: that human beings would continue to devise more sophisticated means of controlling nature and its effects (such as aging) through technology and science, and that these would bring inordinately positive results; that democracies inevitably continue to progress in their development rather than stall or regress; that extremes of individualism and secularism would free people from the supposedly restrictive confines of family, religious, social, and political obligation. Such sentiments were hardly new, of course, but Lasch outlined the weaknesses of them keenly.

Lasch subtitled his book, “American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations,” and it is useful to question just how far the diminishing of expectations he first identified has gone. Looking back on The Culture of Narcissism more than 25 years later, what did Lasch get right and what did he get wrong? What developments did he presciently identify and which ones did he miss? In the interim decades, has Lasch’s narcissist given way to a new type of American character and, if so, what are that character’s defining traits? A descriptive tour revisiting some of Lasch’s themes — especially the transformation of the family — suggests that the narcissism Lasch described has not disappeared. It has simply taken on a different and in some ways more exaggerated form.

The cult of therapy

Today, a book about the vagaries of the American character might still have a great deal to say about narcissism, but its subtitle would likely point to something other than diminishing expectations. It would, perhaps, document “Life in the Age of the Overpraised
The Overpraised American

American,” for praise (and its kin, attention-seeking), is our common cultural currency. If, in the twentieth century, “character” gave way to “personality,” as Lasch and others such as Richard Sennett and Anthony Giddens argued, then in the twenty-first century “personality” exists only if it is broadcast, rated, praised and consumed by as many people as possible—put on display for strangers as well as intimates. In addition, the overpraised American personality expects regularly to assess the worth of others, regardless of his qualifications for doing so: Instant polling, telephone surveys that follow even the most mundane business transaction, voting on television shows such as “American Idol,” ratings on Websites such as Amazon.com and eBay that rank buyers, sellers, and even rate the raters all give the overpraised American a perpetual reminder of his own supposed control over the success of others.

Moreover, the self-esteem movement nascent when Lasch was writing has reached maturity, and its progeny—the children of Lasch’s 1970s narcissists—are now forming their own families. None of them, evidently, is merely average. Many of them embrace an increasingly egalitarian family structure, uncritically and enthusiastically use personal technologies that alter the rhythms of private life and isolate family members from each other, and approach institutions such as schools and the workplace with a healthy sense of entitlement. They spend less time with their children than parents in Lasch’s day, rely more on experts for advice about how to deal with them when they do, and begin building a résumé of activities and test scores for them from an increasingly early age. When they seek religion, it is a heavily therapeutic kind of faith, and they avail themselves of rafts of advice and consumer products—from Suze Orman’s relentlessly upbeat financial self-esteem directives to the ministrations of professional closet organizers—to help them cope with the “stresses” of their daily lives. It seems like a long time ago that Americans made much of their own clothing, grew their own food, had much larger families, and produced books, like one published in the U.S. in 1911, with titles such as Etiquette: Good Manners for All People, Especially for Those Within the Broad Zone of the Average.

Lasch identified most of these trends in their early stages. Americans, he wrote in The Culture of Narcissism, “have retreated to purely personal preoccupations,” most involving the maintenance or spiritual “growth” of the self. “The contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious,” he noted, and he deemed therapy the successor to both old-fashioned individualism and old-time religion. These and other factors produced the “narcissistic personality of our time,” he said, someone who “depends on others to validate his self-esteem” and who “cannot live without an admiring audience.” Lasch
contrasted this narcissist, who viewed the world as a mirror, with the rugged individualist of earlier times, who saw the world "as an empty wilderness to be shaped by his own design." In the narcissist's world, he argued, confession and self-absorption become "the moral climate."

Today, we are more open about discussing character disorders such as the narcissism and borderline personalities that Lasch described — disorders that present with "vague, ill-defined complaints" rather than traditional symptoms of neuroses — but we have also expanded the range of personal pathologies to include new conditions. Take, for example, the recent discovery of the "highly sensitive person" or HSP. Such people, according to one HSP support Website, have unusually sensitive nervous systems and a "greater capacity for inner searching" but are often misunderstood by the rest of society as merely "shy" or "introverted." They may have "low tolerance for noise, glaring lights, strong odors, clutter and chaos" and frequently find themselves becoming over-stimulated in social settings. Society, alas, does not recognize the unique qualities of such people, and so "sensitive people learn early in life to mask their wonderful attributes of sensitivity, intuition, and creativity." Sensitive people also claim to have unique insights. "When we're not feeling overwhelmed," one HSP told a reporter for a California newspaper, "we can experience joy and love much more deeply than the nonHSP."

Were he alive today, Lasch likely would view HSPs as modern neurasthenics. They are, in essence, allergic to the conditions of modern life, with its hectic pace, congestion, bewildering bureaucracies, and frequently liminal social situations. This is not a pathology of the few; Dr. Elaine Aron, a self-appointed expert on HSPs, claims that there are 50 million highly sensitive people in the country (that's 20 percent of the population). She fears their unique social capital is not being appropriately tapped. "HSPs could contribute much more to society if they received the right kind of attention," she notes on her Website.

But therapy today is itself a form of attention, as a glance at popular self-help books reveals. Lasch might have diagnosed the problem of cultural narcissism, but the contemporary self-help industry has rushed in to try to solve it; the shelves of bookstore self-help aisles are filled with offerings such as Why Is It Always About You? Saving Yourself from the Narcissists in Your Life and Enough About You, Let's Talk About Me: How to Recognize and Manage the Narcissists in Your Life. In the ever-indulgent world of self-help, the narcissist is, of course, never you; it is always someone else.

The overarching goal of most of these volumes (as with those who claim to suffer from HSP) is learning to love oneself. In If Love Is a Game, These Are the Rules, for example, readers embark on a program of self-improve-
ment that begins with “Rule One: You Must Love Yourself First.” “Have a love affair with yourself!” another writer advises in *Codependent No More*. “Practice celebrating your magnificence,” urges the author of *Secrets About Men Every Woman Should Know*. Whether the focus is on repairing strained romantic relationships or getting along better with your boss, today’s commercialized therapy purveyors all begin with the same premise: Think first of yourself. As Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel argued in their recent book, *One Nation Under Therapy*, such relentless focus on our supposedly vulnerable sense of self has infected nearly every aspect of American culture, with predictably pernicious results. Jean Bethke Elshtain has called this the “quivering sentimental self that gets uncomfortable very quickly, because this self has to feel good about itself all the time.”

If anecdotal evidence is any guide, the cult of therapy observed by Lasch also continues to exert its influence over religion. The “soft-core spirituality” Lasch saw as a sign of cultural narcissism thrives in offerings such as Mitch Albom’s best-selling bit of pop spirituality, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, and similar books. “The heaven that is apparently popular with readers these days is nothing more than an excellent therapy session,” New York Times columnist David Brooks noted in 2004. “When you go to [Albom’s] heaven, friends and helpers come and tell you how innately wonderful you are. They help you reach closure. In this heaven, God and his glory are not the center of attention. It’s all about you.”

Lasch identified the mass media as abetting this therapeutic culture; the media, he argued, “with their cult of celebrity and their attempt to surround it with glamour and excitement, have made Americans a nation of fans, moviegoers.” As well, the media “encourage the common man to identify himself with the stars and to hate the ‘herd,’ and make it more and more difficult for him to accept the banality of everyday existence.” This, too, has only intensified since Lasch wrote. An avalanche of celebrity magazines offer candid photographs of movie stars without makeup or taking out the garbage, with headlines conveying the message, “Stars: They’re just like us!” At the same time, cable networks such as VH1 and MTV broadcast programs, like “The Fabulous Life” and “Cibes,” that do little more than offer an endless array of images of celebrities’ decadent homes, spa vacations, shopping sprees, and private jets. The intent is paradoxical: to make celebrities seem more like regular people (and thus make regular people feel better about themselves) and to encourage envy of those same celebrities for their lavish lifestyles, which are unattainable by regular people.

The media now accomplish something else that Lasch could not have predicted, however: They now offer ordinary Americans the opportunity to
become celebrities themselves. In 1979, Lasch noted, “modern life is so thoroughly mediated by electronic images that we cannot help responding to others as if their actions — and our own — were being recorded and simultaneously transmitted to an unseen audience or stored up for close scrutiny at some later time.” Today, there is no “as if” involved; many more of our mundane interactions are recorded — or have the potential to be so. A contributor to the op-ed page of the New York Times recently wrote about enduring an emergency airplane landing. When the plane put down safely, the first people to come aboard were not emergency workers, but a television crew eager to turn the passengers’ harrowing experience into reality television gold. For this passenger, more disturbing than the emergency landing was the speed with which the passengers’ fears were transformed into a surreal form of entertainment for the masses. Indeed, Lasch’s delineation of the secondary characteristics of narcissism perfectly describes the tenor of most contemporary reality TV: pseudo-self-insight, calculating seductiveness, nervous, self-deprecatory humor. Today, TV is itself a form of therapy, and not merely for those who tune into Dr. Phil or Oprah. Television offers 24-hour-a-day reassurance that our “reality” can be interesting — interesting enough, even, to broadcast to millions.

It is not a surprise, in this climate, to find that the ability to win praise and attention has become the marker of success in the culture. As Charles Derber argues in The Pursuit of Attention, such efforts have only increased since Lasch wrote his book. We live, Derber claims, in an “attention-seeking culture” where self-involvement is so great that it even imposes on regular social interactions in the form of “conversational narcissism.” Today we find ordinary Americans setting up webcams in their dorm rooms to broadcast their daily activities over the Internet. Confessional novels and memoirs pour forth from publishers detailing personal histories of drug abuse, incest, sexual profligacy, and various other addictions.

The taxonomy of fame has also changed. Celebrity begets pseudo-celebrity, which begets reality TV celebrity, and the world has become so full of attention-seeking potential stars and starlets that we must grade them like beef: A-list, B-list, C-list, and so on. At the same time, as the demand for attention has increased, it has become more acceptable to be the object of unflattering attention, as witness the antics of celebutante Paris Hilton, who has, among other things, had a pornographic tape of herself widely circulated over the Internet. Websites such as Gawker and Wonkette skewer the rich, famous, and intellectually pretentious, as do, daily, thousands of personal bloggers. Talking heads on television offer cutting remarks about political leaders and other public figures. The underlying theme of much of this
The Overpraised American

commentary is contempt for genuine achievement. Writing in the *Guardian* recently, Dylan Evans noted, “Nowadays, if someone is vastly more talented than us, we don’t congratulate them — we envy them and resent their success. It seems we don’t want heroes we can admire, so much as heroes we can identify with.” “If Achilles were around today,” he added ruefully, “the headline would all be about his heel.”

“Success in our society has to be ratified by publicity,” Lasch wrote. Today, however, the process of ratification is swift and constant, and genuine success based on real achievement is no longer a requirement for receiving it. Any attention will do. So demanding is this need that even the objectively successful, who wouldn’t seem to require additional ratification, still seek it, as the efforts of former celebrities, business tycoons, musicians, and chefs to remain in the public eye through reality television shows attest. The reality of their achievements evidently ceases to matter unless a television audience also endorses it.

For Lasch, writing in the 1970s, the prostitute had replaced the conformist, Willy Loman-like salesman of the 1950s and 1960s as the symbol of achievement in American society. Today, two other types prevail: the porn star, who has taken the prostitute’s art, broadcast it, and in the process become a celebrity, and the reality television star, whose only achievement is his supposed normalcy, which exists only if it is televised. Unlike some other forms of celebrity, pornography and reality television offer the average American the tantalizing idea that he, too, can partake of the glamorous life. In succumbing to this fantasy, however, we fulfill the worst of Lasch’s predictions about the extremes of narcissism.

“Hothouse parenting”

It was in his examination of the transformation of the family that Lasch’s critique was most worrisome, most compelling, and, in retrospect, most apt. The family and the methods of socialization it was encouraging, in Lasch’s view, were the source of potential long-term threats to democracy. In “The Waning of Private Life,” an essay written a few years before the publication of *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch argued that in the study of the transformation of the family, “we are at the same time analyzing the weakening of the psychic basis of democracy — the self-reliant, autonomous, inner-directed individual.” Without individuals who had strong characters and an internal moral compass, Lasch feared, democracy would suffer.

Lasch identified two central problems with the family: the abdication of parental responsibility in the arena of moral education and discipline (and a concomitant reliance on experts to fill the void such an abdication created) and the medicalization of bad behavior in children. The first attitude “confirms, and clothes in the jargon of emotional liberation, the parent’s helpless-
ness to instruct the child in the ways of the world or to transmit ethical pre-
cepts,” Lasch wrote in *The Culture of Narcissism*, and teaches children that
“all feelings are legitimate.” The unintended effect of such parenting was the
undermining of parents’ efforts to raise psychologically healthy children:
“The parent’s failure to administer just punishment to the child undermines
the child’s self-esteem rather than strengthening it,” Lasch argued.

The second impulse, medicalization, stemmed directly from the first.
Parents refusing to enforce discipline “rely on doctors, psychiatrists, and the
child’s own peers to impose rules on the child and to see that he conforms to
them,” Lasch observed. “If the child refuses to eat what his parents think he
ought to eat, the parents appeal to medical authority. If he is unruly, they
call in a psychiatrist to help the child with his ‘prob-
lem.’ In this way, parents make their own problem — insubordination — the child’s.” The result was
families that increasingly relied on outside expert advice rather than their own judgment to raise their
children.

There is little clinical evidence that self-esteem bolstering does children any good.

The children of Lasch’s narcissists are now raising their own children, and it is possible to see, in broad
outline, some emerging patterns that suggest Lasch’s concerns about the importance of the family and
socialization were well-founded. Although difficult to assess statistically, certain trends in childrearing are
finding their way into media reports about the contemporary family, particularly families that are
middle and upper-middle class. How widespread such practices are is, of

course, difficult to say. But a tour of the modern family’s current challenges suggests they are directly connected to the narcissism Lasch described in the 1970s, as is the overpraised, overscheduled child whose major influences are not his parents, but his television, his computer, his video games, his service providers, and his peers. Although not every family fits the broad pattern outlined here, the growing anecdotal and clinical evidence suggests that such behavior is on the rise.

In a much-discussed 2004 article in *Psychology Today*, Hara Estroff Marano bluntly argued that the “hothouse parenting” techniques of today’s mothers and fathers are creating “a nation of wimps.” “With few challenges all their own, kids are unable to forge their creative adaptations to the normal vicissitudes of life,” Marano wrote. “That not only makes them risk-averse, it makes them psychologically fragile, riddled with anxiety. In the process they’re robbed of identity, meaning, and a sense of accomplishment, to say nothing of a shot at real happiness.” The result, Marano said, is “new levels of psychological distress among the young,” including rising rates of depression, whose occurrence among children in the 1990s surpassed that of people over the age of 40.

The “hothouse parenting” to which Marano refers is a combination of
The Overpraised American
trends in childrearing that have reached critical mass in the past ten years. The first and most prominent is the concern for building children’s self-esteem, an idea that Lasch noted was gaining adherents as early as the 1970s. “We grew up being told that we were all special,” notes a child of the seventies and contributor to Retrohell, a book about popular culture in the 1970s and 1980s. “People blamed society for any rotten apple. All these people being told since birth that they’re okay and just as wonderful as anyone else, regardless of whether or not this was true.” Popular culture aided in this enterprise. The television show “Captain Kangaroo,” for example, included cartoons about “The Most Important Person in the Whole Wide World,” whose concluding message was always the same: The most important person was “You, and you hardly even know you!” “I’m sure it was a pioneering work in the field of self-esteem,” notes the Retrohell contributor, “but this kind of smug ’70s niceness did us far more harm than good.”

Another product of that 70s thinking, Capitol Hill intern Jessica Cutler — who prostituted herself building, CCtfl to various men and then cravenly blogged about it as “Washingtonienne,” creating a mini-scandal in the process — told the Washington Post that as a student, she was placed in a program for gifted children that gave no grades but did serve up healthy portions of self-esteem rhetoric. “They tell you, ‘You guys, you are smarter than most people,”’ Cutler said. “You kind of create your own moral universe . . . . It’s like, well, I like myself. If other people don’t like me, then whatever. I’m out of here.”

Yet there is little clinical evidence that self-esteem bolstering does children any good. A team of psychologists published the results of a study in Scientific American in January 2005 that examined the link between self-esteem and academic success. Their findings: “Self-esteem in the 10th grade is only weakly predictive of academic achievement in 12th grade.” More interestingly, the study noted, “Artificially boosting self-esteem may lower subsequent performance.” And high self-esteem encouraged risky behaviors outside of the classroom: “Those with high self-esteem are less inhibited, more willing to disregard risks and more prone to engage in sex,” the researchers concluded.

Linked to this focus on self-esteem is another trend: excessive praise. As the New York Times recently noted, the conventional wisdom, beginning in the late 1990s, was that children should be praised for nearly everything they did, and schools often featured posters with slogans such as “Praise every child every day.” But like self-esteem building, an excess of praise can have negative effects on its intended recipients. “Many educators and child psychologists are concluding that less praise is often better and frequent praise for unexceptional actions can actually have a negative impact on chil-

An excess of praise, like self-esteem building, can have negative effects on its recipients.
dren,” the Times story reported. “Praising every time lowers a child’s motivation,” psychologist Ron Taffel told the newspaper. “It cheapens the praise, and children become dependent on praise.” Taffel offered the example of children sledding in Central Park, with their parents shouting outlandish encomiums from the top of the hill. “The children were being praised for responding to the laws of gravity,” he said. The article goes on to note the danger of creating children who are “praise addicts” and who, in fact, become less motivated to do well at tasks and lack confidence in themselves over the long term.

Why did parents start overpraising? One reason might be the guilt they feel over the fact that they spend greater amounts of time away from their children. Fretta Reitzes, who directs the Goldman Center for Youth and Family at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA, told the Times that she has observed that working mothers want their time with their kids to be “full of smiles and hugs,” not strife, a state much more likely to occur if Mommy is dispensing praise rather than discipline. And the child-advice industry continues to churn out tomes encouraging praise, such as the forthcoming How to Praise Boys Well and How to Praise Girls Well. Used to constant praise at home, children now also expect it at school, as the ubiquitous practice of grade inflation suggests. In 2002, Professor Harvey Mansfield of Harvard sparked controversy when he publicly criticized his university for issuing As to a quarter of all undergraduates (another quarter received A-minuses). “There is something inappropriate — almost sick — in the spectacle of mature adults showering young people with unbelievable praise,” Mansfield wrote in the Chronicle of Higher Education.

The emphasis on self-esteem building and praise can be found creeping into many different aspects of children’s lives. As I witnessed at a child’s birthday party in a well-to-do Washington suburb recently, the reptile expert hired by the parents to entertain the assembled toddlers didn’t merely perform his routine. At the end of it, he had to present the lucky birthday boy with a large, official-looking certificate declaring him a bona fide junior herpetologist, which the assembled guests responded to by treating the boy to a vigorous round of applause. It’s no wonder the shelves of suburban recreation rooms nationwide groan under the weight of participation trophies, seventh-place medals, and ribbons congratulating kids for simply showing up.

Ironically, this “hothouse parenting” is occurring at a time when mothers and fathers are spending much less time with their children. Writing in the journal Society, sociologist D. Stanley Eitzen noted, “on average, parents today spend 2.2 fewer hours a week with their children than parents did in
the 1960s,” and “American children spend half of their waking hours in supervised, child-centered environments.” The Wall Street Journal noted recently that “fewer than one-third of all children sit down to eat dinner with both parents on any given night,” and fewer than that if both parents work. As Mary Eberstadt’s indispensable book, Home-Alone America, documented, this parental absence is exacting a serious toll on children in the form of behavioral problems, obesity, depression, and anomic.

Spending time with one’s family is clearly the ideal situation if one hopes to raise healthy, well-adjusted children. A Harvard Medical School study whose results were reported in the Wall Street Journal recently found that “the odds of being overweight were 15 percent lower among those who ate dinner with their family on ‘most days’ or ‘every day’ compared with those who ate with their family ‘never’ or on ‘some days.’” Similarly, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University found that “teens from families that almost never eat dinner together are 72 percent more likely to use illegal drugs, cigarettes and alcohol than the average teen.” A 2002 article in the journal Pediatrics found a “strong relationship” between the amounts of time young men and women were left unsupervised in their homes and sexual activity.

Yet many contemporary parents assess the time they spend with their children in terms of quality rather than quantity. In The Culture of Narcissism, Lasch noted “social routines, formerly dignified as ritual, degenerat[ing] into role-playing.” Although such a label did not enter the lexicon until well after Lasch’s book was written, his formulation seems a particularly compelling description of the contemporary notion of “quality time,” that concentrated and catch-all period of time that working parents actually spend with their children. Parents now concentrate their parenting into a few hours per day.

One of the more disturbing explications of quality time appeared in a recent opinion piece published in the New York Times. Speaking of her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, who is about to start nursery school, Jenny Rosenstrach admitted, “Yes, I’m happy that she’s heading out into the world to create her own set of experiences and establish her own identity. But what I’m really happy about is that those six hours a week that she spends in the classroom are now six hours that move out of my nanny’s column on the Official Scorecard of Quality Time.” Ms. Rosenstrach’s scorecard is a competitive tally of how much time she spends with her toddler daughter and ten-month-old baby compared to the amount of time they spend with their full-time nanny. After noting that she spends ten hours a day every weekday away from her kids, Rosenstrach boasts that she nevertheless keeps track of the few minutes she speaks to her two-year-old on the phone. “You better
Christine Rosen

believe it’s logged on to the spreadsheet” of quality time, she writes. She even counts the hour she and her husband spend reading their children stories as double-time, since they are so engaged with the kids while they are doing it.

Nevertheless, even with the combined hours logged by both parents, the nanny still comes out well ahead in the time wars. But this doesn’t bother Ms. Rosenstrach, and her stated reason why is a vivid and disturbing example of self-involved parenting. When she sees her daughter pretending to be like Mommy and dressing up to go to work, Rosenstrach says, she feels she has achieved “a no-questions-asked victory.” “With or without those hours my daughters will be logging in school,” she declares triumphantly, “I win.”

But what sort of victory is this, and why, in the telling, is it Ms. Rosenstrach who is the winner and not her child? One is left to wonder whether, years later, her children will ratify this supposed victory.

It is not only the time pressure of dual-career families that encourages isolation and a dwindling connection among family members. The architecture of the middle and upper-middle class home has also contributed to the problem. As D. Stanley Eitzen has observed, “These huge houses, built, ironically, at the very time that family size is declining, tend to isolate their inhabitants from outsiders and from other family members. They provide all of the necessities for comfort and recreation, thus glorifying the private sphere over public places. Moreover, the number and size of the rooms encourages each family member to have their own space rather than shared spaces.” Affluence has created opportunities for parents to give their children more and bigger spaces in the home, as the New York Times reported in March, but such spaces also take children away from their parents when they are in the home. Fifteen-year-olds enjoy “personal suites” that include well-decorated bedrooms and sitting rooms outfitted with computers, TVs, DVD players, and private phone lines, as well as their own bathrooms. More lavish kids’ spaces might include walk-in closets, spaces for slumber parties, or a “Rapunzel Room” in the shape of a tower. One builder in California even offers an “American Idol” room. “Suggested furnishings, as seen in a model home, include a long mirror where an aspiring child star can practice song and dance routines, and a makeup mirror surrounded by Hollywood lights for applying greasepaint,” the Times noted.

As houses get bigger, the skills required to run them deteriorate, and a form of domestic learned helplessness sets in. The result, particularly for the affluent, is the outsourcing of domestic responsibilities to an extent that Lasch likely couldn’t have imagined: nannies, personal chefs, car services to ferry kids to and from activities, cleaning services, grocery delivery services, rotating teams of babysitters to assist on the weekends. As a New York
The Overpraised American

*Times Magazine* food columnist recently recounted, new categories of food businesses are springing up to meet the demand for outsourcing. One Maryland woman, for example, offers a weekly e-mail subscription menu service called the “Six O’Clock Scramble” that includes a grocery list of ingredients and five recipes for dinners requiring less than 30 minutes preparation time each. Another woman in Seattle established “Dream Dinners,” a “food assembly store.” In the words of the *Times*: “When they come to the store, they are given recipes and a prep station. All of the shopping and chopping is done in advance. Over the course of about two hours and for about $200 (including ingredients), they prepare eight to 12 dishes for a family of four” that they can freeze for that week’s meals.

Time-challenged parents can now also rely on a burgeoning “childwork” industry to help them do just about everything else besides feeding their children, from potty training to teaching them how to ride a bike. This is “one of our economy’s growth industries, as affluent parents try to balance work and family, deal with ever intensifying anxieties, and give their kids a leg up in the race for success,” historian Steven Mintz told the *Wall Street Journal* recently. The story went on to describe parents enrolling children in art classes rather than encouraging them to draw and paint at the dining room table, or dropping three-year-olds off at soccer or baseball lessons rather than playing with them in the backyard or at the local park. Time that children used to spend with their parents is now spent with an array of “professionals,” and parents often rationalize this choice by arguing that it is necessary to provide advantages for their children in such a competitive world.

Even discipline can be outsourced, as the example of “parent coaches” attests. A *New York Times* reporter recently followed the activities of a woman whose seven- and four-year-old sons were wreaking havoc around the house by bashing each other with large foam swords. “This is stressing me out, guys,” the mother said to her unruly children. “You can sword, but I’m feeling compromised here.” A split-second later she was on the phone with a parent coach, who told her what to do to calm the boys down. “My children were beating me down,” said another advocate of parent coaching. “They were winning the war with the whining and just the constant needing me and not being able to do anything themselves.”

Many parents would argue that the motivation for seeking expert advice and outsourcing their domestic responsibilities is twofold: to alleviate the stress of their overburdened schedules and to provide their children with the “best” of everything and thus ensure their future success. From infant flashcards to Mozart CDs that are supposed to help fire the neurons of a child’s brain, this reliance on expertise (and the supposed science that undergirds it)
Christine Rosen has gained adherents throughout the culture, despite the fact that there is little evidence it works. “I don’t think there is any established videotape or CD or computer program or type of music to play that we’ve shown with any scientific backing to actually help our children,” neuroscientist Dr. Jay Giedd told the PBS television show “Frontline” recently. “The more technical and more advanced the science becomes, often the more it leads us back to some very basic tenets of spending loving, quality time with our children. The brain is largely wired for social interaction and for bonding with caretakers,” he said.

But social interaction and family bonding faces a new challenger, one that families themselves have welcomed into the home: technology. Although Lasch discussed its impact in The Culture of Narcissism, he did not foresee its ubiquity or the extent of its negative effects on the family. According to a recent survey by Knowledge Networks/sri, a marketing research firm, 61 percent of children have a television in their bedrooms, and “forty-six percent of children with a TV in their bedroom do at least half of their TV viewing in the privacy of those rooms.” Children spend an average of four-and-a-half hours each day (often alone) in front of TV, computer, and video game screens, reports the Alliance for Childhood. Another study, conducted by Public Agenda, interviewed parents who reported that they worry about the impact of television on their children. Nevertheless, half of those interviewed said their kids had television sets in their own rooms. The Kaiser Family Foundation found that 30 percent of children under the age of three have television sets in their bedrooms.

A recent ad for the digital video recorder company TiVo featured a drawing of a young child delivering the following monologue: “I got a Magic Box. I tell the Magic Box to get every last Paleoworld episode and — poof — done. I tell it I got a science project on volcanoes, and — whammy — there are volcanoes in my living room. It starts shows whenever the parental units say so, and stops them when they say so, too. I guess that makes them feel like they’re in control. Whatever. I still like the Magic Box.”

This slacker monologue fits perfectly with the warnings offered by the critic Roger Scruton, who argued that “television has confined each young person from childhood onwards before a box of intriguing platitudes. Without speaking, acting, or making himself interesting to others, he nevertheless receives a full quota of distractions. The TV provides a common and facile subject of communication, while extinguishing the ability to communicate. The result is a new kind of isolation, which is as strongly felt in company as when alone.” A recent report by the Alliance for Childhood offered an even bleaker picture: It cites a 2004 study published in The Lancet that
"linked watching two or more hours of television a day in childhood and adolescence with serious long-term health risks," including "obesity, raised blood cholesterol, smoking, and poor cardiovascular health."

Lasch argued that for the narcissist, the world was a mirror. To the overpraised American, the world is a screen — TV, video game, computer — where it is easy to find examples of others gaining attention and praise and easy to absorb hundreds of hours of passive, personalized entertainment. The result is a society where children's experience is thoroughly mediated by technology and where they spend fewer hours with parents who might counteract the more negative messages many of those media send. Technology encourages what Anthony Giddens called the "sequestration of experience," whereby "direct contact with events and situations which link the individual lifespan to broad issues of morality and finitude are rare and fleeting." But without parents who consistently invest time in their children, such sequestration is difficult to avoid.

There is some evidence that parents are dissatisfied with how their children are turning out and the habits they are forming. A Public Agenda survey on holiday travel found an alarming number of people who are fed up with children's behavior in public: "80 percent of passengers surveyed reported that uncontrolled children ranks number one in the list of rude behaviors" they endure during peak travel hours. Another Public Agenda survey reported that "relatively few parents believe they have been successful in teaching their kids many of the values they consider 'absolutely essential,' such as independence and self-control." They also clearly worry about children's exposure to the messages of the consumer culture, though they continue to allow their children to watch commercial television and videos and to peruse the commercially saturated Internet. The survey found that "substantial majorities of Americans describe teens and children with words like 'lazy' and 'irresponsible,' and few say it is very common to find young people who are friendly or respectful." In addition, "fewer than half of all adults — and only one third of teens — say the next generation will make America a better place."

"It's almost like parents have lost their parenting skills," a woman who helped found a parents' support group told Newsweek last fall. She organized the group to help teach other parents how to say "no" to their children. "Kids who've been given too much too soon grow up to be adults who have difficulty coping with life's disappointments," William Damon, the director of Stanford University's Center on Adolescence, noted in the same story. "The risk of overindulgence is self-centeredness and self-absorption, and that's a mental health risk." The story went on to note the increased demand for training seminars for mental health professionals who find Many of the kids raised on Ritalin end up graduating to adult drugs to cope with life's pressures.
themselves treating increasingly large numbers of "enabling parents" and their overindulged children.

The second tendency in family life identified by Lasch — the turn to medical explanations for solutions to family problems — has also increased exponentially since he wrote. The overprescription of drugs such as Ritalin for treating children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (an increased risk for which has been linked to television viewing at a young age) has been extensively explored in the past few years. Less discussed is what is happening to the kids who have been raised on Ritalin. Many of them end up graduating to adult drugs to cope with life’s pressures. As Andrew Jacobs reported recently in the New York Times, college kids now use prescription stimulants and analeptics such as Adderall and Concerta as study aides, and some estimates suggest that 20 percent of college students nationwide regularly rely on them to get their work done. One Columbia undergraduate, who started taking Ritalin in first grade, now sells her Adderall pills to classmates for five dollars a fix. Thus, the medicalization of behavior problems described by Lasch in the 1970s reached its logical conclusion in the next generation: prescription drugs to treat the new "problems" suffered by the children of the culture of narcissism.

Shock and confusion

As this incomplete and largely descriptive tour of the culture suggests, the narcissistic entitlement Lasch first identified in the 1970s has not disappeared; it has merely taken new form: Lasch’s narcissist has become the overpraised, attention-seeking, technologically dependent American who is aware and concerned about certain influences on family and social life but little motivated to change his lifestyle to counteract them.

Although Lasch might not have anticipated the damaging effects of technology or the rapidity with which the transformation of the family would progress, the conclusions he reached in 1979 still have resonance. In an afterword to The Culture of Narcissism, Lasch described a culture that has "replaced character building with permissiveness, the cure of souls with the cure of the psyche, blind justice with therapeutic justice, philosophy with social science, personal authority with an equally irrational authority of professional experts. It has tempered competition with antagonistic cooperation . . . It has surrounded people with ‘symbolically mediated information’ and has substituted images of reality for reality itself. Without intending to, it has created new forms of illiteracy."

Lasch argued throughout The Culture of Narcissism that "The best defenses against the terrors of existence are the homely comforts of love, work, and family life, which connect us to a world that is independent of our wishes yet responsive to our needs." These were the very things he saw
The Overpraised American

the culture beginning to devalue. It is as true today as it was in Lasch’s day that society requires the creation of people who are capable of fulfilling their responsibilities to democratic culture. And yet Lasch had little hope that Americans would meet this challenge in the future. Writing in a later work, The Minimal Self, Lasch argued: “With the help of an elaborate network of therapeutic professions, which themselves have largely abandoned approaches stressing introspective insight in favor of ‘coping’ and behavior modification, men and women today are trying to piece together a technology of the self, the only apparent alternative to personal collapse.”

The indictment he handed down in this later book was harsh but worth quoting at length, as it describes well our contemporary situation. He envisioned a culture whose children “spend too much time watching television, since adults use the television set as a baby-sitter and a substitute for parental guidance and discipline. They spend too many of their days in child-care centers, most of which offer the most perfunctory kind of care. They eat junk food, listen to junk music, read junk comics, and spend endless hours playing video games, because their parents are too busy or too harried to offer them proper nourishment for their minds and bodies. They attend third-rate schools and get third-rate moral advice from their elders,” since their parents “hesitate to ‘impose’ their moral standards on the young or to appear overly ‘judgemental.’”

Although the children of Lasch’s narcissists express both shock and confusion over the disorder of their family lives and the declining civility around them, their response so far has been largely one of retreat — into congratulatory, therapeutic reassurances, into the cocoon of increasingly large homes where the demands of domesticity and family life can be outsourced and distracting entertainments easily obtained. This is a technologically sophisticated world that nevertheless increasingly lacks opportunities for genuine connection. It is a world where parents fret about negative, outside influences on children yet do little to stop children (or themselves) from watching hour after hour of the television that celebrates those very influences. Demanding constant praise and immediate feedback, and without knowing where, at any given moment, they rest on the tumultuous yet finely calibrated scale of success, Americans are, in the end, even more anxious and unhappy than the narcissists Lasch first described. Whether or not these anxieties will become a permanent feature of our culture remains to be seen. But as Lasch’s book reminds us, their influence is not likely to disappear. It is likely to grow even more powerful in ways now beyond our ability to imagine.
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