

## the downside of empty praise

### TRENDS

Boomer parents who struggled through an affirmation wasteland when they were teenagers have been working overtime to correct that imbalance by habitually praising their own children and teenagers—whether or not their kids' actions are truly praiseworthy. Now their unconscious mantra: "An overpraised kid is a loved kid" is coming back to bite them.

Culture watchers say teenagers and young adults are so overcoddled that they're ill-equipped to cope with real-world disappointments and struggles. "At the time my children were raised, we were

suffering from a misguided notion that healthy self-esteem results from something extrinsic that tells you you're a good person," says Betsy Brown Braun, who's a child development expert and the mother of 26-year-old triplets, in a USA Today interview. Over time, kids have grown numb to the impact of praise—and savvy about spotting empty affirmations—as adults have lowered their standards for what's praiseworthy.

The skin-deep strategies of self-esteem proponents have served only to undermine kids' confidence. Sam Goldstein, a neuropsychologist at the University of Utah who's often sought by students who are struggling to deal with adversity, compares today's young people to bubbles—on the surface they seem secure and happy, but they burst at the first sign of trouble.

The same dynamic is fueling a massive movement of twentysomethings who graduate from college, then move back home for long stretches. According to career specialist Jeffrey Zaslow, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, "Family dynamics in our culture have been changed by divorce, the high cost of living, latchkey childhoods, and the trend of delayed marriage and parenthood." One of the boomerang grads Zaslow interviewed, 28-year-old Courtney

Reilly, moved back into her parents' home when she was in grad school and has been there ever since. "There's a stunted independence of twentysomethings today," says Reilly. "I finally have my career settled. I really have to move on."

As parents and other adults concentrate on showering their kids with praise, they also work hard to protect them from feelings of shame—the great bogey emotion of Boomers. But in a cover article for *Parade Magazine*, Dr. Joyce Brothers says our ban-the-shame culture has caused many to lose their identity bearings. Brothers writes: "Rather than increasing our self-esteem, the suppression of shame does just the opposite: The lowering of our sights causes a deep discomfort... Positive shame occurs when we see ourselves as we really are..."

Susan Morris Shaffer, co-author of *Mom, Can I Move Back In With You?*, says too many parents operate as lifestyle-enablers, bail-out experts, and chore-finishers. The antidote to this social virus:

- Give kids real responsibilities and let them experience real consequences.
- Be slow to help kids when they're capable of doing the work or task themselves.
- Resist the "entitlement" attitude some kids have by treating hardship and struggle as just a normal part of life.
- Use praise like a rifle, not a shotgun—look for specific, worthy targets for your praise; don't spray it around.



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## THE SEEDS OF VIOLENT BEHAVIOR

Even though violent crimes targeting young people have dropped considerably, school violence continues to rise. The worst school shooting since Columbine—last month's tragedy in Red Lake, Minnesota—brought renewed attention to the trend. But what are the forces at work behind the violent actions of some teenagers?

● **Male, Not Female**—Boys are more likely to commit violent acts than girls—the school shootings are anecdotal

support for this. Across the board, "male" is the only consistent factor that shows up in studies on teen violence.

● **A Disadvantaged Childhood**—Kids who grow up in poverty resort to violence more often than those who don't. But the exception is that kids who live in a high socioeconomic neighborhood and display a lot of physical aggression are likely to get involved in violent acts.

● **Kids Who Abuse More Than One Drug**—A life habit of drug abuse, rather than experimentation, leads to violence.

● **Disconnection From Nurturing Relationships at Home and School**—

Again, if the school shootings function as a collective case study, disconnection from nurturing adults is a prevalent common thread among the shooters.

● **Poor Grades**—The higher the GPA, the less likely a student will commit a violent act.

● **Anger, Cigarette Smoking, and Non-violent Delinquency**—When these three ingredients are combined, the possibility of violent behavior goes way up.

**Related Note:** A study by the National Institutes of Health found that "get tough" strategies such as boot camps and detention centers are ineffective at preventing violent behavior among teenagers.