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**The Highly Prize Child — Challenging Parents and Therapists  
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*Pampered, privileged, and petulant, who are these children in charge and what are the best methods for parents and therapists to work with them?*

He walked into my office with no anxiety—a cute 8-year-old with tiny designer glasses and a spiky crew cut. He didn’t return my greeting or make eye contact but quickly went to work casing my office to find something to look at or play with. When I could engage him, he wasn’t responsive, often ignored my questions, and appeared bored and indifferent. Most of the time, he couldn’t be engaged but attempted to entertain himself with whatever he could find.

He denied having any knowledge about what brought him to counseling. “I don’t know” and shrugs were his most frequent responses with little or no hesitation, indicating the matter wasn’t worth much thought. When I asked him about the most recent school suspension, he dismissed it easily by explaining that he was blamed for something he didn’t do.

“This is boring. Do you have any games?” he asked.

“How about a story game?” I replied.

“That sounds dumb,” he interrupted before I could describe it. “What do you got to eat? I’m hungry.”

**Who’s Running the Show?**  
All children need to be prized, need to be loved, need to be cared for, but highly prized children have been treated in a way that is ultimately wounding to them. On the surface, highly prized children are self-absorbed, demanding, and indifferent to other people’s desires and needs. Underneath, however, these children are often depressed, unhappy, and lack self-confidence.

They are satisfied for only a short while with what they have before they want something more. They may be returning from Disneyland but crying because they can’t have a new toy or only got the small fries. They have difficulty entertaining themselves. They can exhibit perfectly wonderful social skills when there is something for them to gain. They can also throw fits well into grade school, argue persistently, and make completing homework or finishing a chore more trouble than its worth for their beleaguered parents. They are rarely able to take any responsibility for what happens. It’s invariably someone else who caused the problem.

Highly prized children show up in therapy early on because they usually don’t adjust well in school. As preschoolers, they believe they are the center of the universe, and it is a rude awakening to start kindergarten or first grade and realize they are one of a group and no longer get special attention. It’s like believing you’re a prince or princess and being thrown into a group of commoners who don’t understand this. William J. Doherty, PhD, in his book, Take Back Your Kids: Confident Parenting in Turbulent Times (Sorin Books, 2000), describes children as consumers of parental services, with parents as the providers of these services and the brokers of community services. The outcome is insecure parents who identify too closely with their children’s successes and failures, frantically overscheduled children, and the deterioration of family life.

Highly prized children tell me that “life got hard” all of a sudden. They feel that schoolwork is difficult or boring. They fear succeeding years will be harder and the homework more burdensome. They are frequently underachievers because they aren’t used to doing what adults require them to do. It’s often a fight to get them to stay on task or complete homework. The teacher sees them fidgeting, talking to neighbors, distracting other kids, or not completing assignments, but they don’t act like this when it is something that they choose to do. A 1998 Newsweek poll found that 42% of Americans think children have a great need of private tutoring, which may account for the explosive growth in educational enrichment and tutoring centers like Sylvan, Huntington, and others.

Because children today require constant supervision out of safety concerns, they are rarely afforded the time to go outside and play as kids did a generation ago. The result is an endless round of activities from play dates, lessons, sports of every kind, scouts, and many parties and organized events that are so common, they could hardly be called “special.” The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap by Alvin Rosenfeld, MD, and Nicole Wise (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2000) asks the question: “Are our children doing the things they want to do, or are we fulfilling our own hopes and dreams through our kids?” Good, modern parents, the authors suggest, are expected to give their children every advantage they can afford.

Highly prized children don’t remember other children’s names or particularly care about them. They have social skills usually behind grade level and difficulty developing empathy for other people and their feelings. They have been known to bully other children, tease and ridicule them, and try to control games or cheat to win. They are often unpopular with their peers and sometimes develop a “clown” persona to attract the kind of attention they seek.

Highly prized children are frequently not good team players. They want to be stars and usually can’t make it on a sports team. They have difficulty with the developmental aspects of learning a sport or discipline and expect to be perfect with no experience or practice, then pout and collapse when they make mistakes. They blame others for not passing them the ball or the coach for not letting them play the best positions.

Highly prized children can enchant their parents with little or no effort. They have low tolerance for frustration and limited experience being challenged to do hard tasks. Their parents may have expressed great excitement and amazement for virtually anything they did. They probably were allowed to have enormous control over every aspect of their care. They are frequently picky eaters because they are given special foods if they don’t like what their parents are eating. They often stay up late, sleep in their parent’s bed, and live in a world where their desires and needs reign as the most important ones. They’ve learned early the tactics of whining, wheedling, emotional blackmail, and extortion to get their way.

One little girl I saw in therapy would cry if her parents didn’t take the car she wanted them to drive on an outing. They would give in even if the space was crowded or wasn’t suitable for the trip because they were afraid of upsetting her. They saw her as easily upset and fragile. I saw her as controlling. She was anxious, it’s true, because at the age of 4, she was running the show and knew at some level that she wasn’t equipped to handle it.

**Adult-centered vs. Child-centered Households**  
An adult-centered household is ultimately better for children than a child-centered one. In an adult-centered household, children see the rewards that come with growing up and taking on responsibility and attempt to prove their maturity to get those rewards. In a child-centered household, children are the royalty, and parents are the servants. I’ve seen parents plead with their children to let them have some time to themselves, and marital relationships usually suffer when parents are enslaved to the relentless demands of child masters. In these homes, children often don’t have respect for parents or adult authority and see their own opinions and ideas as equal to adults. Highly prized children tell me that they never want to grow up because they see adulthood as a lot of work and no fun. They have it all now. Why change anything?

As teenagers, highly prized children must be bribed to do anything, are often surly and disrespectful, may have failing grades despite above average intelligence, have no career plans or grandiose aspirations such as being a rock star or major league athlete, and may be using drugs or alcohol to medicate the bad feelings they can’t deal with.

As teenagers with no emotional need for their parents, they manipulate them for privileges; use them for the room, food, car, and spending money that keeps them supplied with what they want; and do nothing for the family in return. Some parents tell me they are afraid to set limits for their teenagers for fear of how they may retaliate. Because no one said no to them, these teenagers have great difficulty with self-discipline and saying no to themselves.

Madeline Levine, PhD, in her new book, The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids (Harper Collins, 2006), summarizes her own 20-year experience treating adolescents and a study by Suniya S. Luthar, PhD, and Chris S. Sexton on the not-so-hidden mental health epidemic among privileged youths. “In spite of their economic and social advantages, they experience among the highest rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety disorders, somatic complaints, and unhappiness of any group of children in this country.” Materialism, the emphasis on external measures for a sense of self, affects children negatively. Tim Kasser, PhD, and Richard M. Ryan, PhD, in “A Dark Side of the American Dream: Correlates of Financial Success as a Central Life Aspiration,” note that materialistic kids have lower grades and higher rates of depression and substance abuse than nonmaterialistic kids. These findings are similar to Dan Kindlon’s earlier research on parenting practices from his Millennium study (Too Much of a Good Thing: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age, Hyperion, 2001). He discovered seven syndromes as a result of “giving too much and expecting too little”: self-centeredness, anger and rage, hurried-worried-driven, not motivated, eating problems, self-control problems, and spoiled. Girls who described themselves as “very spoiled” were three times more likely to have driven while drunk. Teens who rated their parents as “too lenient” were at greater risk for eating disorders, underachievement, and permissive attitudes toward sex.

Highly prized children often don’t feel good about themselves despite displaying a grandiose or inflated self-image. True self esteem is earned by accomplishing life’s challenges and from doing something hard and succeeding. These kids eventually come to distrust their parents’ undeserved praise. Highly prized children often realize they are a disappointment to their parents and themselves. Even early grade school children will confess to me that they “aren’t as great as their parents want them to be or think they are,” or in some cases, they actually have suicidal thoughts and fantasies because their life is such a struggle. They have a hard time reconciling their specialness with the ever-increasing demands to perform. Parents start to express disappointment in the child who doesn’t read at grade level, can’t cope with striking out at baseball, and gets suspended for hitting and pushing. Unfortunately, without help and left to their own devices, the highly prized child will develop a better defense organization (i.e., a bigger split between their real needs and feelings and the image they project). They will bury their fears and inadequacies and buy into the false image of perfection. They will compensate by looking good.

**How Did They Get This Way?**  
Highly prized children often have circumstances of their birth that set them up for what follows. Their parents may have had fertility problems, and they are the long-awaited product of expensive in vitro procedures. They may have been the miraculous adopted child after unsuccessful fertility treatment. They may be the only child, or worse, the only child of now-divorced parents who each have no one else to dote on. They may be the only child in a one-parent household where the lines between adult and child have become blurred and the two-member family functions like roommates or companions.

They may have survived some kind of early crisis—prematurity or another infant malady that made them highly prized. They may be the product of a two-career household with more money than time and are indulged to compensate for the guilt their parents feel. Their parents may just want to give them everything that they didn’t have growing up.

But it may also be that none of these circumstances triggered their exalted status. It doesn’t matter why they are over prized. The treatment is the same.

**What Do We Do About This?**  
**1. Parents must first take back control. They must learn to set limits and enforce them.**They must provide some discipline for their children. Children need to feel vulnerable and trust in their parents’ guidance and wisdom. They do better when they feel connected to a loving parent and want to please him or her. Discipline is often the most difficult problem for parents because it is necessary to go through a period when the situation worsens before it gets better. Doherty emphasizes that it’s OK for children to not always like their parents, sometimes to even hate them.

It is necessary to develop a plan, identify some consequences, and begin to put it into place. Using nagging and yelling to motivate children is never effective There are many books and classes available describing effective limit-setting and consequences. Therapists routinely provide this information to parents with great specificity for their child. It gives the wrong message to children to continue taking them to places and buying them special items and treats when they are uncooperative and resistant. What children get should match what they give to teach them how the real world works.

Without early and consistent real world experiences, children are not prepared for life on their own. Usually when parents first begin setting limits and using consequences, children try harder to make the old ways of whining, nagging, bullying, and tantruming work. It takes support and a long-range vision for parents to hold firm. Frequently, parents tell me how surprised they are to discover their children are actually happier when order has been restored.

**2. Parents must only reward and praise children when they truly deserve it.** Rewarding children when they make no effort only teaches them to expect rewards for no effort. This isn’t teaching them how to function in the real world. The real world demands a lot from us. Most college classes and jobs require sustained effort and the development of substantial skill and knowledge. Undeserved praise does nothing for a child’s self-esteem.

**3. Teach children to understand that other people have needs and feelings starting with their parents.** Make them aware of how privileged they are and how their circumstances compare with less fortunate people. Create some opportunities for them to be genuinely helpful to others—adults and children starting with their own family.

**4. Help children look inside for how their behavior affected them.** Look for opportunities to help them understand how they disappointed themselves, how they chose incorrectly, or how they knew better but didn’t follow through. In this way, they will develop their own conscience and not always need to be policed by parents or taught to do what is correct, moral, and ethical. They will develop their own reasons to act responsibly and well.

**What Can Therapy Do?**  
In practically every instance, parents changing their beliefs and behaviors at home with children and providing consistent discipline and support will have much greater impact on children than a one-hour therapy appointment each week. Therapy is often of no value in circumstances of highly prized children if the parents are not willing to change their approach. Highly prized children will, in those instances, just want to play in therapy, have no motivation to work on issues, and the therapist becomes a paid playmate. However, when parents are working hand in hand with the therapist, substantial changes can often be realized.

The therapist is able to create stories, puppet plays, or scenarios in sand, clay, or artwork that present more empowering ideas and themes. Without preaching, he or she is often able to plant ideas and change limiting belief patterns through play and playful engagement with the child. To be successful, we want highly prized children to learn to accept who and what they are without inflating themselves. We want them to accept that they are dependent and limited in knowledge and skills and need parents and teachers to make decisions for them and act in their best interest. We want them to be able to function as team players and submerge their individuality at times to the group’s needs. We want them to be valued and loved for who they are and not for what their parents need them to be.

It’s important to get help for highly prized children when they first show difficulty getting along at school and with peers. Often, these are intelligent, gifted children who will not make good use of their abilities and talents without discipline and help. Invariably, these children have parents who have great love for them and often feel badly that they could not see the bigger picture when they were indulging their child. The good news is that children are resilient and, with love and consistency, are usually able to adapt, grow, and evolve into healthy adults.

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