

# How to Write an Article About Current Parenting Styles

June 30, 2011

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## How to Write an Article About Current Parenting Styles

By Alfie Kohn

*1. To maximize the chance of getting your article published, be careful to make exactly the same argument that shows up in every other article on the topic. It sounds like this: "Parents today refuse to set limits for their children. Instead of disciplining them, they coddle and dote and shield them from frustration in order to protect their self-esteem. The result: a whole generation of undisciplined narcissists with a sense of entitlement that will eventually crash into the unforgiving real world." With enough padding, you can easily expand that 50-word summary into a lengthy essay without adding anything much of substance – and without saying anything that hasn't already been said in umpteen other articles[1] and books[2].*

*2. Interview and quote only the carefully selected parenting authors who accept this thesis and will restate it for you.*

*3. Depend exclusively on snarky anecdotes about silly parents. Hope your readers won't notice that you haven't cited any real data to support your thesis – either about the prevalence of such parenting or about its effects – because no such data exist.[3]*

4. Even as you repeat what is by now the stale conventional wisdom about permissive parents and overprotected kids who don't have a chance to learn from failure, try to create the impression that you are actually a courageous contrarian, boldly challenging the conventional wisdom.

5. Slide from one indictment about parents (e.g., they hover too close) to a very different one (e.g., they're too lax) as if these aren't discrete hypotheses. In fact, if you write smoothly enough, readers may not notice that your complaints actually conflict with one another. For example, you can fault parents for being too wrapped up in their kids' success, pushing them relentlessly to triumph over their peers – and then, a few paragraphs later, fault the same cohort of parents for trying to protect their kids from competition (by giving trophies to all the kids who participated in a game). Likewise, feel free to warn about outcomes that seem difficult to reconcile with one another: The young adults who were parented this way are self-satisfied twits – more pleased with themselves than their accomplishments merit . . . and, not only that, but they're so unhappy that they're in therapy!

6. Give the impression that this set of problems is unprecedented, or at least far worse than what we've seen in any previous generation – even though, again, there's not a shred of evidence to support that contention. (Indeed, very similar complaints have been offered for decades, if not centuries.)[4]

7. Frame your essay so that the curious phenomenon to be explained is this type of parenting rather than all the folks who are eager to believe that we aren't tough enough on our kids. Don't ask why parents might want to be reassured (notwithstanding all the developmental evidence to the contrary) that experiencing frustration and failure at a young age is terrific psychological preparation for coping with frustration and failure in adulthood.

8. Above all, ignore the powerfully conservative value system that underlies this way of looking at children and parenting, and the fact that it's accepted uncritically in our culture even by people who are politically progressive.

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## Notes

1. For example, in the *Atlantic Monthly* ("How to Land Your Kid in Therapy," 2011), *Newsweek* ("Just Say No: Why Parents Must Set Limits for Kids Who Want It All," 2004), *Time* ("Parents and Children: Who's in Charge Here?", 2001), *New York Times Magazine* ("The Trouble with Self-Esteem," 2002; "Enough with the Overparenting," 2006), the *New Yorker* ("The Child Trap: The Rise of Overparenting," 2008), and countless opinion pieces published in newspapers, syndicated columns, and blogs.

2. To name just a few: *The Myth of Self-Esteem* (1998), *The Self-Esteem Trap* (2008), *The Feel-Good Curriculum* (2000), *The Epidemic* (2003), *Overindulged Children* (2003), *Spoiling Childhood* (1997), *The Narcissism Epidemic* (2009), *Generation Me* (2007), *Pampered Child Syndrome* (2005), and *The Omnipotent Child* (1994). Trust me: if you've read one of these, you've read them all.

3. The one exception is Jean Twenge, a conservative social scientist who has published surveys in support of her claims about higher levels of narcissism in today's youth. Be sure to quote her conclusions – and ignore the researchers in the field who have questioned them and failed to replicate her results.

4. See my article "Spoiled Rotten – A Timeless Complaint," *Washington Post*, July 18, 2010.

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