



Is **NARCISSISM** becoming normal?

parenting in a digital age III

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Does a life immersed in social media make narcissistic behaviour begin to seem normal?

How much time and emotional energy do your children spend working on Project Me? I don't mean a school research assignment on their family tree. YouTube's tagline, "Broadcast Yourself", and Twitter's, "What are you doing?" give a hint at what I am referring to. The ongoing project to tell the world—at least a significantly inflated collection of your 'friends'—who you are, what you are doing in your cool life, and why you should be 'followed'. Social media now plays such an ever-present role in our lives and this self-promotion then becomes a significant part of our relational diet.

In this article, I'll explore the difficult role that we as parents have in raising our children in this digitally saturated landscape. Discipling and guiding them not only towards a godly and safe use of social media, but with a wisdom and discernment to realise that social media is not neutral; it can have a shaping influence even when we are using it well or 'safely'. Hence our focus question, "Does a life immersed in social media make narcissistic behaviour begin to seem normal?"

When suggesting that social media is not neutral, we acknowledge that the inventors, designers, and then promoters, of technology have a worldview which informs their inventing, designing, and promoting (without them even realising it). Individualism, and a naked capitalism, are two of the worldviews driving digital innovators. Actually, when the technology uses insecurities of people and their mindset that self-promotion is a route to contentment, significant profits can be made—as evidenced by the inventor of Facebook recently becoming the third richest person in the world.

"Hang on a minute," you say, "that doesn't make Facebook/Instagram/Snapchat wrong and off-limits for Christians". Absolutely not. However, the encouragement is to not only nurture our children to use these well, but to also teach wisdom about its potential to pull us away from a biblical view of relating and living that God has designed for humans—where humility, self-sacrifice, and proactive love of neighbour is our response to His grace and mercy through Jesus over and above a self-focused self-promotion.

Social networking is designed and structured for users to craft an online representation of themselves and to then market and promote that particular version of themselves. We might not be conscious of using it this way, but we cannot deny that this is its core function: by design.

Is narcissism the right word?

Perhaps referring to this Me Project as narcissism is too strong to describe the average engagement with social media: maybe. Especially given that most definitions of narcissism will refer to a pride and lack of empathy and concern for others. I suspect that

this self-promotion is often coming from a place of insecurity and over-concern for others' perception of who we are!

If this is the case, then the remedy is not more time limits, digital Sabbaths, better parental controls, or restrictions (as important as these things may be). This deeper diagnosis requires a deeper remedy: the gospel of the Lord Jesus. Our children need to have a deep and profound knowledge and indwelling of the truth that God has loved, designed, and made them and they are "in Him" because of the grace and mercy of the cross. This is the remedy for true narcissism and for the insecurity dressed up as narcissism in social media.

I finish with some reflections on parenting

Keeping talking

Let's keep talking to our children about the way that our habits and practices—especially the ones that we are constantly engaged with—shape what we desire and love. If we are constantly 'playing' in a self-promotion landscape then a life committed to turning from self-focus will be harder.

Honour age limits

Let's honour the age restrictions given for social media accounts for our children. Not just because it is good to not deceive when signing up, but because there is merit in delaying access due to the nature of content discussed. However, what might be even more prudent in this time when their brain neural pathways are at their most plastic, is delaying as long as possible the shaping impact that the design of the technology may have on their view of themselves and relationships. It's hard enough navigating adolescence and its self-identity issues without adding the layer of the self-promoting pressures that social media brings.

Modelling

Let's remember the power of modelling in our parenting. How much are we immersed in online self-promotion of ourselves; our nice house, our interesting experiences, our successful workouts, and our lovely family?

Identity in Jesus

Let's continue to teach and live the beautiful good news of God's unconditional love, acceptance, and forgiveness: the gospel of the Lord Jesus. *

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