

# Parents Just Don't Understand

From a toddler's height to a teen's work ethic to an adult child's marriage, a range of studies shows that moms and dads may be among the worst judges of their kids. But there are deeply adaptive reasons for parents' enduring misperceptions.

By Nick Friedman, published on July 1, 2014 - last reviewed on July 14, 2014

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At the Brooklyn preschool where my wife teaches, the parents of the youngest students, the not-yet-3-year-olds, arrive each fall wide-eyed and anxious. It's the start of their children's grand adventure in learning and socialization, with all the promise and pitfalls they recall from their own school days.

Fortunately, each of the 2-year-olds is special—at least, that's the understated message their parents try to impart to my wife at pick-up time. They point out how beautifully Belinda twirls—

"She should study ballet, don't you think?"—or how intensely Tristan concentrates when he stacks Legos—"He's a born engineer." They all think their children are future baseball All-Stars, Hollywood legends, or Nobel Prize winners. They can't help it: It's in every parent's nature to see his or her children in ways most others don't. In some cases, wearing rose-colored glasses benefits the [self-esteem](#) of parents and kids alike. In others, though, it can foster denial that helps no one.

## WHAT PARENTS GET WRONG

Misperceptions are a natural part of [parenting](#). Mothers and fathers see their children as they want to see them—often, as they've seen them since birth. They also persist in envisioning long-imagined futures for their kids. If your mom or dad ever expressed the assumption that you'd follow in their [career](#) footsteps, you know the drill. Or maybe your parents' "my baby" tag still clings to you like burrs to a sock although you long ago hacked your way through the adult underbrush. If you're a parent yourself, you're most likely [guilty](#) of similar misperceptions as well—you may just not realize it.

There is no single cause of parental misperceptions, but one place to start looking, experts agree, is in the mirror. As egocentric creatures, we see the world through the perspective we know best—our own. We have far more information about ourselves than we do about other people, and this influences our assumptions and judgments about the people we interact with every day, our offspring most definitely included.

We also make highly subjective judgments about ourselves. Deep down, most of us believe that we are special in some way, that we possess qualities that set us apart from the masses. "The [self-serving bias](#) gives people an exaggerated sense of their own uniqueness," says psychology researcher Judith Rich Harris, the author of *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do*. Such positive illusions provide real psychological benefits: They promote [optimism](#), for example, and give us more of a sense of control over our future.

Parents, for better or worse, can extend these positive illusions to their children, believing, consciously or unconsciously, that their offspring possess special qualities that also happen to reflect favorably on their own parenting skills. "If their kids are turning out well," Harris says, "they may attribute this outcome to something they think is unusual about their childrearing methods, not realizing that what they are doing is almost identical to what most of the other parents in the neighborhood are doing."

Of course, to feed our self-serving bias, it helps to see our children in the best positive light. "Unless they have a conflicted, awful relationship, parents give their kids the benefit of the doubt," says Duke University psychologist Mark Leary. "They think their kids are smarter than they really are and probably more attractive than they really are."

Biology also plays a powerful role in parental bias. From an evolutionary perspective, we are compelled to reproduce to ensure that we pass our genetic line to future generations and avoid extinction. Our offspring represent a biological investment in our own futures, then, and we are driven to engage in strategic behavior to protect that investment.

That may not sound especially sentimental. Shouldn't love and affection factor into how we view our children? The answer is yes, says University of California, Davis developmental psychologist Jay Belsky, but those emotions are not necessarily the motivators we think they are. "We have this misguided notion in Western culture, and certainly in Western psychology, that parents invariably, unconditionally, and indisputably love their children and devote themselves to them," Belsky says, "when in fact the evolutionary analysis is that children are investments that parents make, perhaps unknowingly, as a function of the return they might get on those children."

Following are seven of the most common parental misperceptions, and their sources:

## **1: "MY CHILD IS A CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK"**

Jennifer Watson, 47, grew up in rural Camden, North Carolina, near the Great Dismal Swamp. The second-oldest and sole sister of four boys, she eagerly took part in the wrestling, tree climbing, and motorcycle racing that defined her [childhood](#). "I was always around boys and their friends," says Watson, now a web developer in Richmond, Virginia. "I wasn't afraid to try things that girls at that time normally wouldn't do." She was convinced that if she had any daughters of her own, they'd be as rough-and-tumble as she'd been.

Watson has since given birth to three children, all girls, and also has a stepdaughter. But her oldest, 21-year-old Jenna, and Isadora, one of her 13-year-old twins, have little interest in her vision of childhood play. "I didn't try to push them one way or another," Watson says. "I just felt that if I had girls, they would be tomboys because I had felt like one so deeply."

Watson's assumption that her girls would naturally follow in her footsteps might be fairly standard among parents, especially new ones. But expecting to raise a "chip off the old block" derives from a misperception about how children actually develop and the limited amount of control parents have over that process. In reality, a child's home [environment](#) is only one of a range of factors that influence who he or she will become.

Watson's "chip off the old block" misperception also points to a presumption that major [personality](#) traits are heritable—that just because she shares a genetic legacy with her girls, they will naturally be like her. In truth, Jenna, Isadora, and her twin, Odessa, could have grown to love princesses, NASCAR, astrophysics, or all of the above, and there's little Watson could have done to influence that.

"That's the mistake a lot of parents make—they think that either it's 'my genes' that are going to make my kids like me, or my upbringing and how I raise my kids that are going to make them like me," Leary says.

Studies of behavioral [genetics](#) show that, on average, people's personalities are about half genetically determined and half environmentally determined. "And the half that is environmental is not necessarily parental," Leary notes.

Why, then, are so many parents convinced that their kids are just like them, even when evidence suggests otherwise? "Parents notice the matches between their kids and themselves more than the mismatches," Leary says. "So when my kid does like something I like, or gets angry in the same way that I do, or has the same attitudes I do, I'm much more attuned to that than I am to times when my kid is different from me. But in fact, the differences probably outnumber the similarities."

Parents can profoundly influence their children's lives by placing them in schools where they will thrive and creating a home environment that supports creative activity, Harris has written. But parental attempts to model behavior are typically not as effective, and moms and dads will generally find they have no more influence on a child's behavior than do his or her peers.

But if parents are not the primary influence on how kids turn out, how do we account for real-life chips and blocks, like Liza Minnelli and Judy Garland; Peyton, Eli, and Archie Manning; or Ben and Jerry Stiller? These examples are not so surprising, Harris says, because parents do exert some influence on their children, in some cases more than others. Genetically, parents pass on certain psychological and physical characteristics, and environmentally, they can provide children with training, contacts, and a step up in a certain career. Taking over the family business is sometimes simply a sound financial decision.

## **2: "MY CHILD IS GIFTED"**

We live in an unusual era for parenting in the United States, one in which families are having fewer children on average than ever before. Between 1970 and 2007, as birthrates slowed, the average population per U.S. household dropped from 3.14 people to 2.56. From an evolutionary standpoint, having fewer eggs in our family baskets may lead parents to focus on their select few to ensure their survival. Compared to periods when having multiple children was much more common (in part because the risk of infant mortality was higher), "we invest far more in our children today," Leary says.

Evolutionary psychologist Jennifer Hahn-Holbrook of Chapman University in Orange, California, agrees. "One of the reasons we have such high rates of helicopter parenting today, and this strong need to see your child as better than average, is because we have fewer children," she says. "When all your hopes for your genetic line are tied up in one egg, you're going to invest everything in that egg. But if you have, say, six or seven kids, you can actually get away with investing less in each one because no single child's outcome is going to be the be-all and end-all of your reproductive success."

Long-term societal changes have also had an impact. It once took a village of extended families and close neighbors to raise a child, but we are now a nation of independent family units. Parents today operate in large part without the guidance and experience they once received from elders, and they have less day-to-day experience of observing other children's and parents' behavior. They can end up drawing conclusions about their kids based on a very limited sample base—what happens in their own home.

This breeds circular thinking which, along with a desire to elevate children's status in a competitive economy steeped in mixed messages about success, can contribute to the common reflexive misperception that "my child is gifted."

"If I'm trying to decide if my kid is doing better or worse than everybody else's kids, I'm really operating on pretty skimpy information," Leary says. "That would not have been true for most of human evolutionary history, including more recent history. I think we have more room to make these kinds of mistakes in our judgments of our kids than at any time in the past."

This phenomenon is sometimes called "the Lake Wobegon effect," after Garrison Keillor's public radio series, *A Prairie Home Companion*, which announces itself as being broadcast from a town where "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average."

"Of course my child is gifted!" says University of Nevada, Las Vegas anthropology professor Peter Gray. "There's a halo effect: If you love your kid, you see her through rose-colored glasses, so she's more attractive, more intelligent, and more socially and academically gifted. You could say, from an evolutionary perspective, that that's adaptive, part of facilitating the [attachment](#) a parent feels for his kid, and it makes the parent want to do all sorts of things for her."



### 3: "HE'S STILL MY BABY"

Attachment may also help explain why so many parents forever view their youngest child as the baby of the family, in some ways literally, even after he or she has become a full-grown adult.

In a 2013 study, developmental psychologist Jordy Kaufman, of Australia's Swinburne University, surveyed 747 mothers and found that 70 percent reported that their first or youngest child (all were between the ages of 2 and 6) appeared to grow suddenly and substantially upon the arrival of a new sibling. Kaufman says that shift in perception occurs because the mothers had perceived the previous youngest (or only) child as smaller than he or she really was—about

three inches shorter, on average. When a new baby is born, the "spell" is broken and the mother finally sees the once-youngest child as he or she really is, while presumably transferring what Kaufman terms her "baby illusion" to the newborn.

"Parents' concept of 'babyness' influences how they see the youngest child for potentially the rest of their life," Kaufman says. "And they don't update their concept. That is, unless another child is born." At which point, the new child becomes "the baby" and should expect to stay that way, at least in the parents' eyes.

#### **4: "MY OLDEST IS A SLACKER"**

On the other end of the birth-order spectrum, parents may see their oldest child as a slacker, a byproduct of higher expectations for the oldest to excel academically and set an example for younger brothers and sisters. The parental refrain, "You could try so much harder," may be familiar to many firstborns, but the reality is that, on average, oldest children outperform younger siblings academically.

For a 2013 study, Duke University economist Joseph Hotz and co-author Juan Pantano of Washington University in St. Louis surveyed parents, then separated them into two categories: those they called "unforgiving," who were willing to [discipline](#) any of their children for poor school performance regardless of [birth order](#), and "[forgiving](#)" parents, who did not like to [punish](#) any child, regardless of birth order.

Hotz asked the latter group a hypothetical question about each child in the family: "If [he/she] brought home a report card with lower grades than expected, how likely would you be to keep a close eye on [his/her] activities?" The replies revealed that the forgiving parents would come down harder on their oldest child and supervise him or her more closely than they would the others. Hotz theorizes that this apparent bias against the firstborn is actually an effort to send a message to younger siblings that their parents are in charge and that there will be retribution for any perceived academic slacking. Calling the phenomenon "trickle down discipline," Hotz explains, "You put the most energy into the firstborn, trying to set the tone for all."

The parents in his study were well intentioned, Hotz says, and their reaction to the "slacker" dilemma may just be an attempt to remedy a perceived problem. The way parents choose to discipline their children depends on their own priorities, he says, but he found a common thread of treating kids differently depending on their position in the family birth order.

#### **5: "MY CHILD'S WEIGHT IS HEALTHY"**

The ramifications of misperceiving a child's height are fairly benign, but that's not the case for the equally common misperception that children who are overweight have no such problem.

In February, University of Nebraska researcher Alyssa Lundahl and two colleagues issued a review of 121 previously published studies covering more than 80,000 parental estimates of children's weight. They found that more than half of all parents of overweight or obese children underestimated their child's weight, and that parents of kids ages 2 to 5 were the most likely to

do so—a particularly troubling result because overweight children in that age group are five times as likely as others to be overweight at age 12.

In this case, outside influences—specifically, the media—may be partly to blame for the misperception. Lundahl believes that parents do not have an accurate enough [understanding](#) of what a healthy weight should be for their children because media reports on child [obesity](#) so often focus on extreme cases. In essence, the parents' mental image of a child's average weight, and of the risks of being overweight, has become distorted.

But there may be an additional layer to the misperception—denial. "Parents might be resistant to labeling or stigmatizing their child," Lundahl says, and they might seek to avoid negative reflections on themselves. Acknowledging a child's weight problem, she says, "might mean that they maybe haven't been feeding their child correctly or encouraging healthy lifestyle behaviors." Further, taking action could mean that the parents would have to make lifestyle changes they may be resistant to making.



#### 6: "MY CHILD COULDN'T BE A BULLY"

Denial is also at the heart of a two-headed misperception having to do with children and aggression. Studies have shown that parents fail to recognize both when their children are being bullied and when they're acting as bullies.

"Children very seldom tell their parents either that they bully or are being victimized," says social psychologist Debra Pepler of York University in Toronto, an expert on [bullying](#) prevention. "It's a very shameful experience to be victimized by peers, and there are a variety of reasons children don't tell their teachers or their parents. Some of that has to do with thinking the parents or the teachers are going to make it worse."

In the early 1990s, Pepler studied two groups of children: One, identified as highly aggressive, had been referred for social skills training by their teachers. The other was a comparison group of children, with the same age, [gender](#), and ethnic mix, who had been identified by teachers as socially competent. Pepler put microphones on the two groups and observed their behavior on the playground. Her findings took her aback: The socially competent and socially incompetent bullied other children at the same rate.

"Since that study, a lot of research has shown there are different types of children who are bullies," Pepler says, "and even highly socially skilled children become more popular when they bully. So it doesn't surprise me that some parents think that their child could never bully."

Bullying is a complex behavior and learning to identify whether a child is an aggressor or a victim is not easy; some are both. It's another issue that may be exacerbated by the modern state of parenting without a village support system. "Our children are very disconnected compared with those in virtually every developed country," Pepler says. Parents may see their children in an unduly positive light or simply deny problems.

## **7: "MY DAUGHTER-IN-LAW WANTS MY ADVICE"**

It would be nice to think that by the time we reach adulthood and start our own families, we could fly free from the misperceptions our parents have about us. But that's not always the case.

When children grow up and get married, a new set of parental misperceptions can come into play, says social psychologist Terri Orbuch of the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research. Prime among them is the belief, especially in the early years of a child's [marriage](#), that parental advice and guidance are invaluable—and welcome.

In 1986, Orbuch began tracking 373 newlywed couples to better understand the nature and pressures of marriage. In 2012, she released findings showing that when husbands have a close relationship with their in-laws, a couple's risk of [divorce](#) drops by 20 percent. However, when wives reported a close relationship with their husbands' parents, a couple's risk of divorce rose by 20 percent. "When men feel close to their in-laws," Orbuch says, "it sends a signal to the wife that 'you're important to me, so your family is important to me.' Men also tend to take comments from in-laws less personally."

Women, however, are more relationship-oriented than men, Orbuch says, and more sensitive to commentary about their role in their family, a finding confirmed in her research. "Women—wives—take those comments very personally because they say something about us as individuals or about our sense of self or our worth—and when it comes from a mother-in-law, that can be interpreted as meddling," Orbuch says.

Consciously or not, a mother-in-law can drive a wedge into a marriage with her input, Orbuch says. Still, psychologist Joshua Coleman, cochair of the Council on Contemporary Families, says we should cut mothers-in-law some slack as they adjust to a new role: "Many parents have a hard time navigating the natural decrease in attention and availability—and love, realistically—from the adult child who forms a committed relationship with a wife," he says.

Parental misperceptions arise and take hold in ways that, at first glance, defy logic. Factor in the intensity of most parent-offspring relationships and they can become almost unshakable. All we can do is recognize them and work to overcome them. "Deep down inside, realizing that your children are different from you is probably the best gift you can give them," Jennifer Watson says. "You need to nurture that and just let them be who they really are."

## **Mama, We're All Gifted Now**

How we decide that what's best about our kids is what's most important for any kid is it possible for the parents of every kid in a class to think their child is gifted—and for all of them to be right?

Absolutely.

It's a phenomenon known in social psychology as idiosyncratic trait definitions. "Each of us has a set of filters on when we consider information about ourselves and our kids," Mark Leary says. "Without even thinking about it, we filter the information in a way that's to our liking."

In other words, we redefine what a positive trait means so that we can say that we—or our children—have it.

For example, one parent's definition of being a "gifted" student could be completing homework on time; for another, it may be getting top math grades. Idiosyncratic definitions allow each of us to maintain the perception that we have a gifted child and project that to others, Leary says, for many reasons, including "to make us look good socially."