

The Golden Child

The golden child is as impacted as the scapegoat in different ways.

At some level, the golden child senses that their situation is precarious, so works hard to maintain it. Their belief that the parent is loyal to them at all times is misguided, but, like switching on a light, the narcissist will make sure the golden child feels good about themselves when it matters.

Some may have been invisible or scapegoated for years and then suddenly golden-childed, leaving them to ruthlessly mistreat and even discard siblings that get in the way of the glory and rewards of their new role. Golden children can form a malignant or benign alliance with the narcissistic parent and their status (and safety) is elevated as the scapegoat's decreases.

Deprived of a normal model of parenting (so anxiously attached) and coerced into adopting the narcissist's view of the scapegoat, golden children can develop a distorted view of relationships as dominant/submissive. They can develop vicarious trauma from watching constant attacks on the scapegoated sibling. As well as that, we see a dissociation between their thoughts and feelings (to witness the abuse and maintain the family secret), the development of cognitive distortions in the service of self-preservation (e.g. blaming the scapegoat) and internalised learned helplessness (from fear of the parent as a result of trying to help the scapegoat).

With their empathy deficits, these children become emotionally numb later in life. Children who have developed empathy but fail to demonstrate it towards the scapegoat are vulnerable to experiencing damaged self-esteem and self-identity difficulties, as well as a compromised ability to perceive themselves as a good and worthy person. When this damaged self enters into relationships as an adult, intergenerational problems continue when a new family is patterned on a template of power and control.

Like a narcissist, who essentially experiences crushingly low self-esteem at their core, for a golden child, the fear of the loss of the idealised status can ripple into adulthood leaving triggers such as 'I have been ignored', 'I am unimportant', and to feel ordinary and 'middling' can be unbearable.

Literature commonly suggests that golden children are expected to live out the parent's grandiose self-beliefs and expectations, as an extension of them. That they are valued for what they achieve not for who they are is a problem. Equally so however, we see that whatever their achievements and behaviour, the golden child is still held in the highest esteem; hence they can find it hard to operate in the outside world – unaware that they have been falsely inflated, they are confused when others hold them to account or are less reverential, leading them to become subconsciously aggressive. Childlike, self-pitying but also grandiose, condescending and arrogant, golden children either distance themselves from the parents or there is a 'failure to launch' – already damaged by their upbringing and then lured to stay in the nest by promises of inheritance for example, unaware they have been manipulated because of the narcissist's utter self-interest focus around not wanting to be alone and being looked after in old age.

The golden child commonly becomes an inconsistent fence sitter at the least, who sometimes agrees that the parent is damaging and at other times is their biggest supporter.