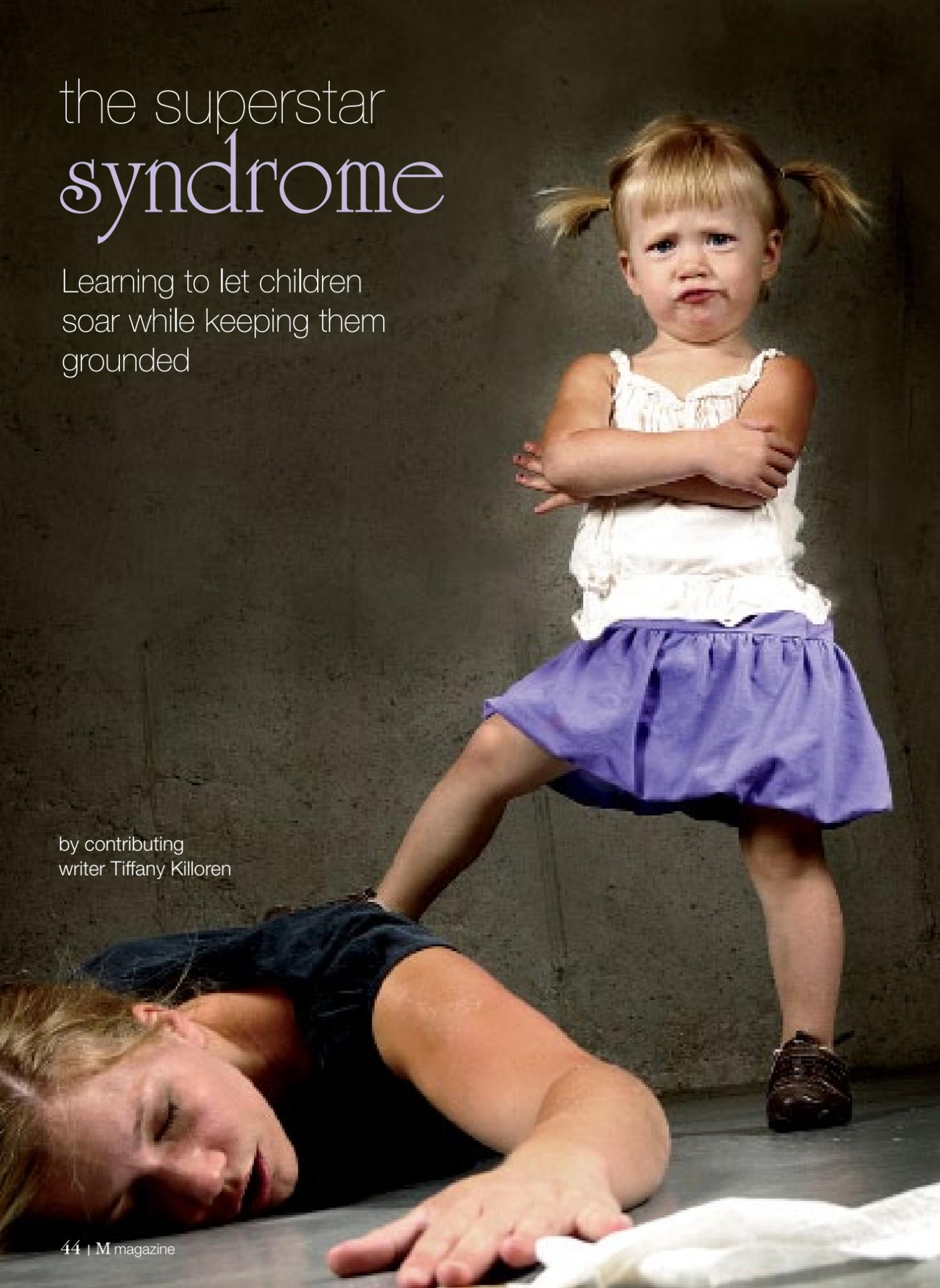


# the superstar syndrome

Learning to let children soar while keeping them grounded

by contributing writer Tiffany Killoren



"French children sleep through the night by three months," Linda stated matter-of-factly. I could feel my head tilt as I stared at her, totally perplexed. I was questioning if what I had just heard had been lost in translation. This Frenchwoman was discussing her baby's sleep habits and, when asked to explain the secret to this sleeping phenomenon, she became noticeably uncomfortable. She was sitting across from

certain amount of autonomy. They are cared for but not overly coddled. They are supervised but not sheltered. French children are taught to deal with life as it's handed to them, hence the 3-month-old baby, who is already becoming conditioned that cries are to be taken seriously and used sparingly. Sensing that we were intrigued by this theory and not totally offended, my new French friend mentioned a book devoted to the differences

into his milk to see them float, but I didn't know how I felt about a book that cast such a broad implicative stroke as to my children's or any red-white-and-blue babies' behavior. Go America.

Tater tot malfeasance aside, could my friend have a point? The author of the book obviously (and not so subtly) thinks so. This is an issue bigger than sleep deprivation with a newborn or dealing with a child's request for a cell phone nicer than



two American women and clearly did not want to offend us. So she treaded carefully into the explanation:

"In America, you focus on your children. In France, we do not. I love my children and would do anything for them, but I will live with my husband for the rest of my life. If I'm making dinner and the baby cries, I do not run into her room right away. I wait to see if she really needs me."

Her point was simple enough. From birth, children in France are granted a

between French and American parenting techniques: *French Children Don't Throw Food*. This lighthearted yet thoroughly researched analysis of culturally unique parenting techniques was penned by Pamela Druckerman, an American mom living in Paris, who was alarmed at how much better behaved French children were than her own. For the first time during the conversation, I felt my motherly defense shield rise. Perhaps my 3-year-old is known to drop a tater tot or two

your own. Maybe it's time to embrace the French connection and consider if *hovering* may be *hurting* our children's development and, as a result, usher them into adulthood with an entitlement complex larger than their first apartment.

On the ever-growing parental to-do list, it's not like "raise entitled child" is penciled in between soccer schedules and art camp. Considered a generational epidemic, debate does not surround if kids are growing up with an entitlement

complex but rather *why*? Authors, scholars and third-party observers alike place blame squarely on parents' shoulders, and while the brutality of these critiques make them difficult to ignore, it asks the question: are we actually *listening*?

*The Wall Street Journal* explored this generational phenomenon in an 2008 article titled, *The "Trophy Kids" Go to Work*. Millennials—the name assigned to the generation born between 1980 and 2001—were

to avoid damaging their self-esteem. They and their parents have placed a high premium on success, filling resumes with not only academic accolades but also sports and other extracurricular activities," reads the article.

Such a public trial and flogging, albeit sting-worthy, did not appear to have resulted in any noticeable change in parenting. Four years later, *The New Yorker* sent ripples through parental airwaves with its article *Spoiled Rotten*, which took an unapologetic look at mistakes in parenting, this time analyzing

then rewarding them when they screw up? By untying and then retying their shoes for them? It almost seems as if we're actively trying to raise a nation of 'adultescents'."

A collective chant of "right on!" and "so true!" could be heard from homes everywhere, but did readers actually see themselves in the piece or applaud the bold declaration of what *other parents* were doing wrong?

Jill and Jerry Hickey are Parkville parents of four kids ages 4 to 15. Like many parents, they are caught in a time man-

Case in point. Consider the latest story to hit the news: A principal of a Massachusetts middle school canceled Honors Night because, per his letter to parents, he thought it could be "devastating to a child who has worked extremely hard in a difficult class but who, despite growth, has not been able to maintain a high grade-point average."

"This highlights what's going on in society," observes Jerry Hickey. "There will always be kids who have certain advantages, but those are not always an equal predictor of success. Sometimes hardships inspire kids to achieve greater things." Although she appreciates the sentiment behind the principal's decision, Jill Hickey disagrees with his message. "You don't take away from the kids who earned the honor." Stressing the importance of the lessons involved, she added, "You can't water everything down in life."

The truth is, we love our children. We want to spare their feelings, build their confidence and empower them with the skills needed to lead fulfilling lives. The challenge is in accomplishing all of that without creating expectations that a perfect life is somehow owed to them.

Patti Vogel is both a concerned K.C. parent and third-party observer to the impact of raising entitled kids. A former high school dance team coach, Vogel left her teaching job after parents threatened to sue her when their daughter didn't make the team. The stress of dealing with overzealous parents who had attorneys on

speed-dial when things didn't go their kid's way was simply too much to take on. As mom to three-year-old Claire, Vogel is determined to be a different kind of parent. She sums up successful parenting as "raising a kind child" and is aware that, even at this young age, her daughter could start developing troubling behavior if left unchecked. "Some parents think that the more you give your kids, the better parent you are." Recognizing that she has given in to Claire's demands in the past, Vogel is conscious of not letting the little things develop into something more. "I'm more conscious now and tell Claire 'no' more often. It's the everyday things that I give in to that could teach her she can have control over me."

Marilyn N. Metzl believes these entitlement concerns are valid. As a practicing psychologist/psychoanalyst in Kansas City, she thinks society is missing the mark on building self-esteem in our kids. "Self-esteem comes from *really* achieving something and knowing that we have to work to get there," Metzl says. Protecting our kids from disappointment does them no favors in a highly competitive world. According to Metzl, families relate to one other differently today. Gone are the days of leisurely afternoons playing outside. We're simply overscheduled and over-stressed. Because time with our children is limited, Metzl believes parents want to avoid filling such precious time with anything but positive messages.

## the flip side

If helicopter parenting is one end of the spectrum, the free-range theory is at the far end of the other. Describing her approach as helping to raise "safe, self-reliant children (without going nuts with worry)," Lenore Skenazy analyzes the collective societal fear—or perhaps paranoia—that cripples our children's development into independent and confident thinkers. Agree or disagree, her ideas will give you something to think about. Check out [freerangekids.com](http://freerangekids.com)

Levels of maturity must be developed at an early age, however. There is a level of dishonesty in perpetuating an entitlement complex, because we are ill-equipping our kids to handle the reality—like it or not—that is waiting for them in the real world. "Sheltering our kids at an early age can be disastrous. For children to feel truly secure, they have to be certain in their parents' values and know they are willing to tell them 'no,'" Metzl maintains.

It may take a village to raise a child, but it will take much more to change the trajectory of an entitlement trend that has been years in the making. It's all about baby steps. Shake things up in your neighborhood book club and assign *French Kids Don't Throw Food* or *Spoiled Rotten* as the next read. Neither may be as entertaining as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, but provocative in an entirely different way. Reading parenting articles is one thing; having the courage to recognize ourselves in the subject matter and incorporating change is another. In that recognition, we can shift the syndrome to one of superstar kids to super savvy parents. Consider it your chance to *vivez comme le Français*. \*

## a penny earned

Sixty-five dollars. According to one survey, that's the average monthly allowance provided to kids these days. Make sure that you're not paying for nothing; consider task-based rates that will teach them the value of working harder and earning more. Try not to get worked up over those occasional weeks when they want to slack off; they'll feel the sting when they want to feed their piggy bank and are left empty-handed. It may make more work for you on the front end, but the dividends are priceless. Check out [life.familyeducation.com](http://life.familyeducation.com) for some helpful tips, [famzoo.com](http://famzoo.com) and [threejars.com](http://threejars.com) for a more high-tech approach to teaching kids about money.



described as reliant on positive feedback and opposed to critique.

"Blame it on doting parents, teachers and coaches. Millennials are truly 'trophy kids,' the pride and joy of their parents. The millennials were lavishly praised and often received trophies when they excelled, and sometimes when they didn't,

the findings of an anthropologist who analyzed our parenting as compared to that of a tribe in the Peruvian Amazon. The author observed, "In contemporary American culture, the patterns are more elusive. What values do we convey by turning our homes into warehouses for dolls? By assigning our kids chores and

agement, juggling act with competing extracurricular schedules, but consider these activities a great opportunity to instill discipline and strong work ethic in their kids. The trend of sugar-coating to spare kids from performance critiques or the biting sting of a tough loss is not one they intend to follow.

## the gift of giving

Convincing your child to clear their closets of excess can be challenging enough, but try taking it to the next level. Don't let them get by with stashing their donation piles by the front door for you to take care. Ask them to choose a charitable organization, look into the drop-off process and go with you to donate. Not only will they understand the efforts necessary to keep up with this often mom-designated task, but they will more greatly appreciate the value in selflessly helping others if they can participate first-hand. Who knows, maybe they will resist a bit less and donate a bit more next time.