How ‘eggshell’ parenting keeps children on high alert

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AFTER “tiger” or “bulldozer” parents, make way for “eggshell” parents. Fragile and emotionally unstable, they force their children to walk on eggshells, anticipating their mood swings. This is a discreet but toxic form of parenting, whose harmful effects can last well beyond childhood.



Did your parents ever shower you with affection before losing their temper for no apparent reason? Did they entrust you with adult problems or make you responsible for their well-being? If these scenes sound familiar, you may have grown up with an “eggshell” parent.

Behind an apparent gentleness and kindness, these adults can suddenly change their behaviour, swinging from affection to anger without warning. The term “eggshell parenting” is not insignificant – like an eggshell, these parents appear solid, but conceal a great deal of emotional fragility. And, their unpredictability forces children to walk on eggshells around them.

Psychologist Kim Sage, who coined the term, emphasised the unpredictability of their reactions. In this unstable climate, children develop a constant hypervigilance. Unable to foresee the reception that awaits them, they become keen observers, on the lookout for the slightest hint of a crisis. To avoid an explosion, they constantly adjust their attitudes or behaviour, sometimes to the detriment of their own identity.

They sometimes go so far as to ask their child to support them emotionally, as if their child were their confidant or even their psychological support. This role reversal blurs the boundaries of parent-child relationships. “You are expected to take care of (the eggshell parent’s) emotions, to turn around them and help regulate them, and/or act in a role of parent,” explained Sage in one of her TikTok videos.

Growing up in such an environment, always on the edge, leaves lasting marks. Children of “eggshell” parents develop early survival mechanisms that often follow them into adulthood. The slightest conflict becomes a source of anxiety, and every social interaction is meticulously analysed, for fear of triggering an unpredictable reaction in the other person.

In these families, the love received is often conditional. The child feels valued only when they meet the parent’s expectations, never for who they really are. This dynamic breeds fragile self-esteem and fuels a perfectionism driven by the constant fear of disappointing.

Trusting others becomes a daily struggle, and expressing emotions seems perilous. Little by little, many children of “eggshell” parents choose to withdraw into themselves, finding in isolation a form of protection. Because being alone is, at the very least, being safe.

Fortunately, it is possible to break out of these patterns. Identifying the harmful dynamics at work is often the first step towards well-being. Psychological support can help you learn to set limits, listen to your own needs and build healthier relationships. Understanding the origins of this parenting style, often inherited from an unstable family history, can also help mitigate its effects.

Long ignored, even downplayed, “eggshell” parenting is beginning to be named and talked about by psychologists and those who have suffered it. Behind unstable behaviour often lies an unresolved family history. By recognising these patterns, we can better understand them, and perhaps gradually free ourselves from them. Because, if you have grown up walking on eggshells, you can also learn, step by step, to put your foot down more firmly.