

Growing Up Too Fast:
Is Parentification
harmful to children?

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NASW OHIO CHAPTER CONFERENCE

Overview

- o Definition and domains/types of parentification
- o A conceptual model of parentification
- o Theoretical perspectives
- o Destructive vs. Adaptive parentification
- o Latest research on parentification
- o Assessment & intervention
- o Social worker's role

What is Parentification?

- o A child taking on a “parental role” for either the parent or other family members
 - o adultification, peerification, spousification (Burton, 2007)
 - o burdened child (Chase, 1999)
 - o inverted child-parent relationships (Bowlby, 1973)
 - o generational boundaries (Frances & Frances, 1976)

Parentification Domains

(Mika, Bergner, & Baum, 1987)

- o (a) spousal role vis-a-vis parents
- o (b) parental role vis-a-vis parents
- o (c) parental role vis-a-vis siblings
- o (d) nonspecific adult role-taking

Emotional vs. Instrumental

(Williams & Francis, 2010)

o **Emotional parentification**

- o “I was the mediator or ‘go-between’ when a conflict arose between my parents.”
- o “I consoled one or both of my parents when they were distressed.”

o **Instrumental parentification**

- o “My parent(s) discussed their financial issues and problems with me.”
- o “My parent(s) asked me to make decisions.”



- o Emotional parentification may be more harmful than instrumental parentification (Hooper, 2007; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Tompkins, 2007).
- o Emotional parentification in childhood was associated with depression and externalizing problems in adolescence (Khafi, Yates, & Luthar, 2014).

Parent's View vs. Children's View

- When adolescents engage in emotional caretaking, their mothers perceive them as more competent and capable.
- In contrast, adolescents feel more distressed and experience more symptoms of anxiety and depression when they engage in more emotional caretaking of their parent.

(Champion et al., 2009)

Emotional Incest

- o When a child of the opposite sex is chosen to meet the emotional needs of the parent and becomes a "surrogate spouse"



Types of Emotional Parentification

- o **Problem-solving parentification** (i.e., family relying on children to solve their problems)
- o **Adult parentification** (i.e., feeling like “the adult in the family” rather than the child)

(Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morell, 2001; Mika, Bergner, & Buam, 1987)

Beneficial Effects

- o Research has shown beneficial effects of problem-solving parentification on decreasing Mexican-heritage youths' substance use when there was parent-child communication (Shin & Hecht, 2013).

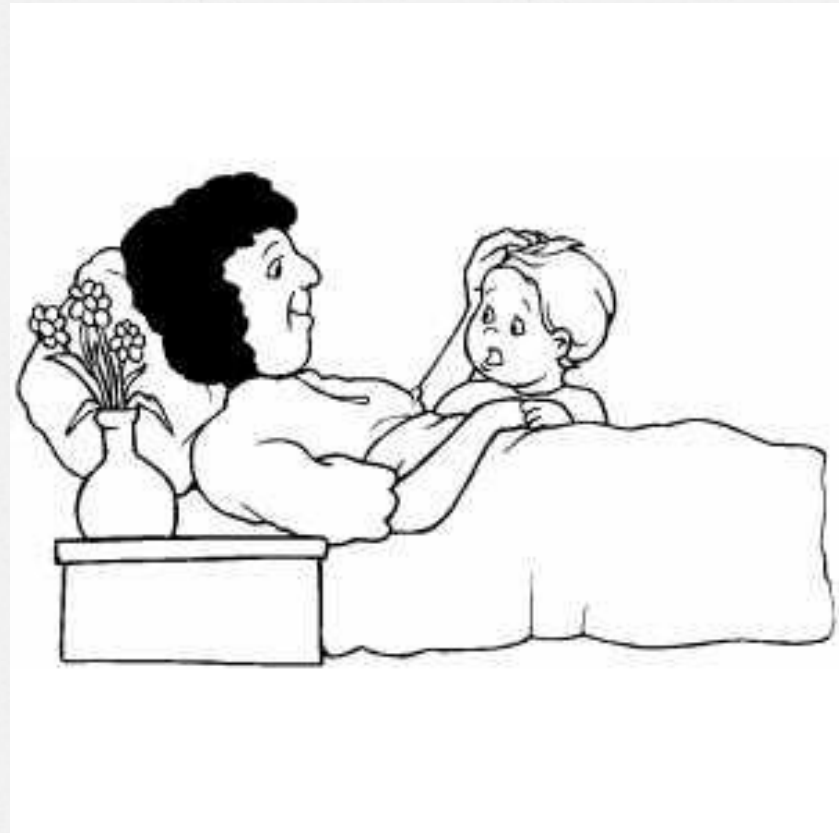
A Conceptual Model of Parentification



Family Context

(Burton, 2007)

- o Family needs
- o Culture
- o Capital
 - o Parental
 - o Social



Family Needs

(Burton, 2007)

- o Providing sibling care as “quasi-parent”
- o Providing extensive care for ailing parents or elderly relatives
- o Taking on work to contribute to the family’s financial resources
- o Managing the family finances
- o Serving as an emotional confidant for parents

Case—Immigrant Child

- o Mercedes, age 12, has been her mother's translator since the age of eight.
- o *“I take care of everything: the banks, hospitals, social workers, school business for my sister and brother, and bill collectors. Everybody looks to me for answers to everything. I have a lot of responsibility.”*

(Burton, 2007, p. 334)

Parental Capital

(Burton, 2007)

- o Parents' individual resources
- o Time
- o Psychological awareness and reserve
- o Physical & mental health (e.g., depression, addiction)
- o Parenting skills



... fais dodo...
mon petit papaaa,
fais dodo...
et ne bois pas
ton loloo...

zls

In the Absence of a Parent

- o Divorce
- o Death of a parent
- o Military families
- o Incarceration of a parent

Social Capital

- o “the emotional and material resources that come with having viable relationships and social networks” (Burton, 2007, p. 334)

Case—Culture

- o *“I’m the eldest son in my family. My mom is a single parent and works three jobs to make ends meet. So, I’m expected to be her ally, protector, and make significant contributions to the family income as I move into my teen years.” (Eduardo, 12 years old)*

Child Attributes

- o Birth order
- o Gender
- o Maturity
- o Health status



Do Parentified Children Become Helping Professionals?

- o Parentified individuals may be over-represented in helping professions including social workers (Winston, 2003; Jurkovic, 1997).



Theoretical Perspectives

- o Attachment theory (Bowlby)
- o Family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974)
- o Role theory (Ashforth, 2001)

What Parentified Children May Look Like

- o Show aggressive leadership
- o Excessive worry and anxiety about the well-being of others (e.g., siblings)
- o Consistently late for or absent from school
- o Exhibit personally harmful levels of self-sacrificing behaviors
- o Execute more responsible behaviors than their peers
- o Frequently sacrifice school performance to meet family needs

Consequences of Parentification



Destructive Parentification

- o increased problems at school (Burton, 2007)
- o emotional problems (Champion et al., 2009)
- o externalized problem behaviors (Stein, Riedel, & Rotheram-Borus, 1999)

Breakdown in Authority Hierarchies

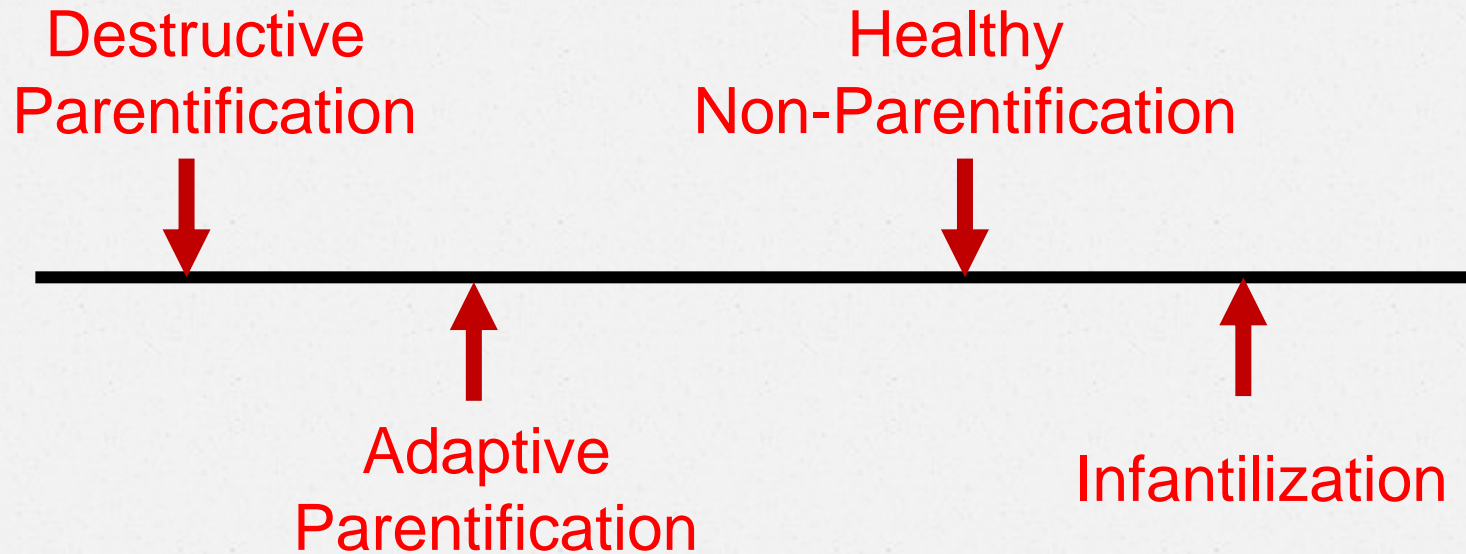
- o *“Sometimes I just don’t believe how this school operates and thinks about us. Here I am a grown man. I take care of my mother and have raised my sisters. Then I come here and this know-nothing teacher treats me like I’m some dumb kid with no responsibilities. I am so frustrated. They are trying to make me something that I am not. Don’t they understand I’m a man and have been a man longer than they have been women?”*
(Jason, 15 years old)

Adaptive Parentification

- o An increased sense of competence (Kuperminc et al., 2009)
- o Enhanced coping (Fuligni, Alvarez, Bachman, & Ruble, 2005; Stein et al., 2007)
- o A greater sense of happiness and role fulfillment (Telzer & Fuligni, 2009)
- o Parent-child intimacy (Tompkins, 2007)
- o Lower likelihood of engaging in sex (Sang, Cederbaum, & Hurlburt, 2014)

Continuum of Children's Caretaking Roles

(Jurkovic, 1997)



Long-Term Consequences of Childhood Parentification

- o Eating, anxiety, and personality disorders (Hooper et al., 2011)
- o Anxiety, depression, psychological distress (Burton, 2007; Hooper & Wallace, 2010; Hooper et al., 2008)
- o Shame (Wells & Jones, 2000)
- o Substance misuse (Stein et al., 1999)

Dysfunctional Parentification

- o Parentification may become problematic or dysfunctional when children “assume excessive responsibility for other family members” (Jurkovic, 1998, p. 237) in a primary support role that is not “appropriately acknowledged, supported, or reciprocated” (p. 239).

Excessive Childhood Responsibilities

(Winton, 2003, p. 4)

- (1) The child is overburdened with them
- (2) The child is charged with responsibilities that are beyond his/her developmental competencies
- (3) The parents assume complementary, child-like roles in relation to the child
- (4) The child's best interests are unnecessarily and excessively neglected in the role assignments
- (5) The child is not explicitly legitimized in his/her parental roles and is even punished for enacting them

Parentification & Culture

o **Minority families**

- o Family obligations as an important duty for children to keep the family in harmony (Kuperminc et al., 2009)
- o African American youth are more likely to experience instrumental parentification than European American youth (Peris et al., 2008)

o **Working-class & families in poverty**

- o Each family member is expected to contribute to the family system (Dudson & Dicker, 2004; Winton, 2003).

o **Immigrant families** (Titzmann, 2012)

Parentification & Culture

- o “Among racially and ethnically diverse families, what may be maladaptive family functioning in one culture may be adaptive family functioning in another culture” (Hooper, 2007, p. 331).



Parentification & Ethnicity

(Khafi, Yates, & Luthar, 2004)

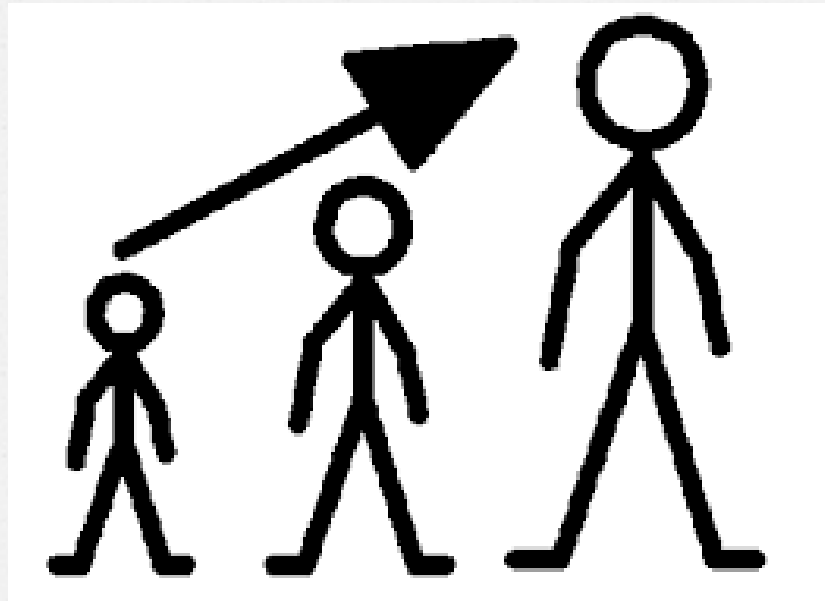
- o Emotional parentification was related to externalizing problems among European American children, but not among African American children.
- o Instrumental parentification contributed to lower parent–child relationship quality among European American children, but not among African American children.

Parentification & Gender

- o Girls are at particular risk for parentification, esp. emotional caregiving (McMahon & Luthar, 2007).
- o Parentified males had worse outcomes than parentified females (Diaz, Siskowski, & Connors, 2007).

Parentification & Age

- As age increases, rates of parentification increases for females but decreases for males (East, 2010).



Case Example

- o “I was 8 years when I first saw my father using alcohol. Often he was too drunk to come home on his own. There were times when I went to pick him up and brought him home. As for my mother, I used to provide emotional support and companionship when she needed it. When my dad was absent, I served as her companion. During arguments and domestic violence, I was there to comfort her.”

Assessment

- o Is the child at risk of parentification?
- o How old is the parentified child?
- o What do the parental roles look like?
Is it instrumental, emotional, or both?
- o Does the child have unmet needs for nurturance?
- o How have these new roles impacted the individual family members?
- o Are these roles temporary?
- o Assess clients for perceived unfairness.

Questions to Ask When Working with Parentified Children

- o How can the shifts within the family system be recognized?
- o How does the family perceive the parentification process? Is it culturally expected and valued?
- o Explore both positive and negative aspects of the parentification process.

What Social Workers Can Do

- o Do not assume parentification as positive or negative experiences.
- o Understand normative family systems within cultures.
 - o Family roles vary among cultures and parentification may look different across ethnic groups.
- o Teach children that they are not responsible for “fixing” their parent’s problem.

What Social Workers Can Do

- o Make sure children have a “safe” outlet for sharing their feelings.
- o Allow the children some important time *for themselves*.
- o Parentified children may have feelings of guilt, shame, and stigma.
 - o Tailor counseling programs to overcome those feelings.

Parent Intervention

- o Parent interventions should be aimed at enhancing their parenting skills.
- o Parents should be aware of possible burdens that caretaking places on their children.
- o Parents who are emotionally dependent on a child must learn to seek support from other adults.
- o Involve the family: Help the client and family restore or reestablish the appropriate boundaries.

Parentified Adults

(Jankowski et al., 2013)

- o They have more typically functioned in a caretaker role.
 - o Help them get used to the role of receiving care.
- o Promote affect regulations.
 - o Unacknowledged and unexpressed primary emotions are preventing such clients from regulating their emotions
- o Facilitate emotional expression.
- o Coach the client on how to engage non-reactively with parents.



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