

## Parentification: a review paper

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### ABSTRACT

The evolving nature of family and parenting styles has introduced a new concept called 'Parentification'. While initial understanding of parentification was based on the projection of parental features onto an individual, today it refers to the conditions that compel a child to ascribe the role of an adult in early age. Parentification has been understood across two main subtypes: Instrumental Parentification and Emotional parentification. However, the concept of parentification has not been explored intensively. This paper hence tries to bring together what is already known about the phenomena of parentification across various cultures, the consequences of parentification on children and the scope for further research on the topic.

**Keywords:** *Parentification, Child Neglect, Early Maturation, Parenting Styles*

**B**oszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) first used the word "parentification" in detail to describe a standard element of relationships whereby parental features are projected onto a person. Suitable and delicate parenting is a requirement for the safe growth of children. This applies not only to early childhood, but an enmeshed parent-child dyad can also undermine intrafamily functions and interpersonal boundaries in adolescence and seriously interfere with standard healthy development (Garber, 2011). Parentification is the absence of boundaries within family sub- systems, where children assume positions and obligations that are typically reserved for adults (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). The parent relinquishes executive functions in the process of parentification by delegating contributory roles to a child or by psychologically and/or physically abandoning the family (Minuchin et al., 1967)

Parentification has been viewed as a result of child neglect when it happens to a pathological degree, as it impedes growth by ignoring fundamental childhood needs and experiences (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Hooper, 2007a, 2007b). The parent is usually not able to maintain their emotional and/or physical obligations as a caregiver in a relationship marked by parentification (Barnett & Parker, 1998). Despite the inconsistency between the developmental needs and the developmental maturity of the child, the caregiver may transfer these responsibilities to the child, or the child may intentionally absorb these duties (Aldridge, 2006; Mechling, 2011). Nevertheless, the child acknowledge that he or she will establish sense of connection with their caregiver and overcome feelings of loss and distress by receiving the care and support they would usually receive (Barnett & Parker, 1998).

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Therefore, the child perceives such undertakings as important and sees the parent's needs as having priority over all different needs. This results in the parentified child lacking the developmentally acceptable and necessary behaviors that usually define childhood (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Bowlby, 1958, 1969; Hooper, 2007a, 2007b).

Parentification is most common within dysfunctional family structures where equilibrium needs to be developed in order for the family to function properly. In several cases, households characterized by parentification are considered to be deficient (Hooper et al., 2008) as a result of an absence of boundaries, and clear parental roles and functions (Hooper, 2007a). Very frequently, for physical, social, mental, or economic reasons, one or both parents are incapacitated, and they begin relying on their child to meet the family needs on their behalf. Correlation with parentification has been found in families with a history of sexual abuse, low socio-economic status, illness, addiction, separation, divorce and single-parent households (Barnett & Parker, 1998; Earley & Cushway, 2002; Macfie, McElwain, et al., 2005). In all these cases, the child is likely to counterbalance for parental deficiencies by taking on the parental role, voluntarily or involuntarily and to varying degrees.

### ***Types of parentification***

Jurkovic (1997) distinguishes between instrumental and emotional parentification, each of which related with different consequences such as adult personality and future relationships

- *Instrumental parentification* applies to the situations where children are assigned duties regarding functional tasks, such as running errands, cooking, clearing bills, and looking after the whole household chores. This subtype is majorly found in family systems when it occurs in isolation, wherein one or both of the caregivers are unable or impaired in a way that they perform these duties because of some illness or other causes, such as needing to work to keep the family's finances. This type of parentification is considered to be the least detrimental of the two subtypes, as it can promote a sense of achievement or competence in the child if daily parental encouragement and appreciation is accessible.
- *Emotional parentification* its more destructive than the instrumental parentification as in this the infant is tend to meet a parents' particular emotional or psychological need. For example, during periods of psychological distress, the child may be required to measure and respond to the parent's emotional needs, act as a confident and unwavering means of help, and provide intervention. This is more commonly seen in the family wherein a parent suffers from a severe disorder or attachment disorders which often occurs together with instrumental parentification. The parent is in constant need for emotional and psychological help to cope with his or her own deficits. This type of parentification is more closely correlated negative effects for the parentified child as a result of the inconsistency between parental expectations and the development of the child (Hooper, 2007a).

### ***Aetiology of Parentification in children***

Most investigators do not consider the parentification method to be necessarily pathological. In times of crisis or stress, adapting adult-like responsibilities is viewed as an opportunity to encourage the development of desirable attributes that can help the child adapt responsible roles in future (Barnett & Parker, 1998; Jurkovic, 1997). Adaptive parentification from "destructive" or pathological parentification was thus separated by Jurkovic (1997). Parentification is deemed adaptive if the benefits given by the child to the well-being of the family are restricted in time, remembered and were not overtaxed (Chase, 1999; Jurkovic, 1997). Efficiently parentification is done through training the child to rise to an adversity on

a temporary basis and knows about the natural giving and taking inherent in most relationships. Parentification, on the other hand, is deemed negative when it includes the prolonged, unrecognized, unresponsive and unsuitable participation (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Jurkovic, Morrell, & Casey, 2001). Jurkovic et al. (2001) stress the significance of the expectations of justice of young people relative to the roles they are assigned in determining destructive types of parentification. Data from a study by Karpel (1976) indicates that parentification is more damaging when young people report increased levels of distinguishable injustice and also identify certain child traits that function in dysfunctional parentification, i.e the "capacity for concern" and "readiness for responsibility" of children. ”

The "destructively parentified" kid, who has taken up duties at the cost of their childhood, is at the extreme end. "Adaptively parentified" children and "non-parentified children" in the center of the spectrum are granted undue obligation for looking after family functions, however such conditions are temporary, and the involvement of the children is remembered. Jurkovic defines non-parentified children as having certain family obligations that are developmentally necessary, but do not demand them exceeding their means. While a dimensional perspective of parentification ventures under circumstances that normalize features of such household structure, there is a lack agreement regarding selective behaviors that distinguish safe, and adaptive parentification from dysfunctional and pathological parentification. Researchers and clinicians are currently debating the behavioral forms of parentification, and also the circumstances whereby parentification behaviors become dysfunctional, unstable or detrimental to minors (Chase, 1999). Sadly, in this sector, not too much advancement has been achieved.

### ***Cultural Considerations***

When studying the phenomenon of parentification in families, cultural and social variables affect the conditions in which families live (Anderson, 1999). Societal norms and traditions, social status, schooling, racial history, ethnic origin, and common historical experiences of community members are affected by child-rearing activities and established societal norms of family members. In the ethnic minority communities, more flexible family roles and more instrumental obligations are to be normative. In the family systems of ethnic minorities such as African Americans, American Indians, Latin Americans etc., the aim of child-rearing is to improve functional skill so that the child is gradually capable of performing culturally specific tasks necessary for adult roles. Flexible family roles are popular behaviors within African American families, where life is focused around child-rearing, where grandparents play an active role involved in child-rearing, and also reside within one household (Anderson, 1999). It is expected that African American children will be independent, progress rapidly through initial developmental stages and help adults in childcare as early as possible. Yet many adjust to the emotional restriction in Chinese culture and resort to intellectualization or somatization to protect the emotional pain. However, it is worth remembering that among ethnic minority communities, there is heterogeneity. Overall, the mechanism and impacts of parentification in various cultural contexts have much to be learned.

### ***Affect of divorce and single parent family on Parentification***

Numerous researches have reported many cases of both instrumental and emotional parentification in children of separated and divorced parents relative to children of non-separated or non-divorced parents (Barber & Eccles, 1992; Johnston, 1990; Jurkovic et al., 2001). Hetherington (1999) published similar results while studying parentification in

divorced and non-divorced families of adolescents from high and low conflict. It was found that in divorced households, adolescents perceived parentification, marked by elevated tension. It was also found that female minors assumed higher levels of emotional parentification. In addition, only infants and elderly children have undergone emotional parentification more frequently (Hetherington, 1999). Fry and Trifiletti (1983) observed that teenagers of single-parent homes due to divorce were adversely impacted by being forced into the presumption of adult liabilities prematurely. Interview data revealed that there was substantial stress from feeling inadequate in the adult position identified by parentified adolescents. In addition, the propensity of a parent to use their child as a peacemaker in the parental conflict was related to adolescent feelings of anxiety, guilt, and resentment.

Studies on divorced families from ethnically diverse, low socioeconomic backgrounds, (Johnston et al., 1987) found evidence for the adverse effect of parentification. Findings suggested that role-reversal was associated with higher behavioral problems and depression in children especially with fathers. Johnston (1990) discovered that task dissemination, familial boundary conflicts, and absence of a co-parental alliance were correlated with interpersonal challenges, behavioral problems, and physical symptoms in younger children. Single-parent families were found to be more vulnerable to the existence of this phenomenon among the various family conformations (Jurkovic, Thirkield and Morrell, 2001) because there is only one adult performing household chores performed by two or more individuals in other family systems, making children more likely to take the missing roles in the family. This is significant because nuclear single-parent families constitute 14.5 percent of the total number of households, 13 percent of which are headed by women, and 1.6 percent by men, as per the data obtained from the National Social and Economic Survey (2015 CASEN survey). This research is based on single-parent families for such reasons.

### ***Consequences of Parentification***

With regard to possible consequences of parentification, studies investigating childhood of parentified children shows that in response to the adoption of the parentified position, these people report a wide range of adverse effects. They are more inclined to display externalizing activities such as violence and destructive actions (Macfie et al., 2005), such as drug use and self-harm (Jacobvitz et al., 2004; Mechling, 2011). In addition, parentification has resulted in decreased relationship competencies (Hooper, 2007a; Macfie et al., 2005) and increased academic issues (Mechling, 2011). Such signs of maladjustment will persist in future if left unresolved, resulting in more instability over lifetime of the parentified person. Given the fact that parentification has documented affect individuals during infancy, there has been little research in this field at present. Instead, much of the study performed centered solely on the impact on individual traits in adulthood of childhood parentification. In particular, parentification has been shown to hinder the creation of identity and the formation of character and to impact interpersonal relationships, even those with their own offspring. Given the fact that parentification has documented affect individuals during infancy, there has been little research in this field at present. Instead, much of the study performed centered solely on the impact on individual traits in adulthood of childhood parentification. In particular, parentification has been shown to hinder the creation of identity and the formation of character and to impact interpersonal relationships, even those with their own offspring.

*The Negative and Positive Effects of Parentification*

• **Established Negative Effects** – It is not possible to ignore the detrimental aftereffects of parentification. The longitudinal study conducted over the last quarter decade has explained multiple negative findings correlated with adolescent parentification. Champion et al. 2009, found that teenagers' may indeed have the absence of the social and cognitive skills necessary be an efficient caretaker and may find it difficult to deal with the position as caregiver efficiently. Some researchers believe that teenagers undergo greater adverse consequences because the duties they indulge in maybe more serious and prolonged (McMahon and Luthar 2007). Others say that the teenager may grow up too quickly or become too independent too soon when these caregiving tasks are intense, unsupervised, unrecognized or inappropriate age, which is known as 'pseudo-maturity' (Galambos and Tilton-Weaver 2000). Therefore, while these harmful effects do not occur instantly, they are frequently seen later in life.

• **Potential Positive Effects** – The correlation of adolescent parentification and positive results in adulthood has been discussed in many recent studies. Jurkovic and Casey argued that there is the scope for parentification to foster competence. In addition, they indicated that the extent to which the child considered parentification to be equitable was potentially important for positive results after parentification. In the family unit where children indicated that parentification process was "fair" they also confirmed that their adult-like actions and duties were not ignored and for short periods of time they exercised those responsibilities. In another research done by Thirkield (2002) a positive correlation was found between age, and instrumental. Results from these studies (Jurkovic & Casey, 2000; Thirkield, 2002) provide preliminary support that the parentification process can produce benefits that can last for long periods of time. It has also been explored that parentification among adolescent immigrants was correlated with positive effects, such as increased levels of individualization and separation from the family system (Walsh et al., 2006). In addition, the result was positive when adolescents view their duties as equal and appropriate: a sense of superiority and competence. They thus concluded that individual autonomy, self-mastery, and family cohesion were created by the availability of adult-like duties among the adolescents. For example, researchers failed to find an important, stable association among parentification and poor outcomes within their sample group of children living in poverty.

The implication of the paper is that it adds to the present literature available on the topic of parentification and gives a deeper insight on the same. The future implication of the paper would include a more theoretical and practical, application-oriented mode of spreading awareness on the topic. Parentification is a concept that has great potential and opportunities to be further explored in different cultures, ethnic groups, socio economic strata and religious settings.

**CONCLUSION**

Introduced by Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark in the year 1973, the term “parentification” has come a long way. It has generally been understood as the process through which a child adopts the responsibilities and role of an adult in the parent-child relationship. Current literature on parentification focuses on the family structure and the influence it can have on children. It has been seen that despite having observed negative effects of parentification later in life, many clinicians and scholars have assumed, it can also have positive effects. Therefore, future research in this field will increase awareness of the developmental consequences of parentification and understanding of the ways in which parentification can contribute to a number of other outcomes across an individual’s life span.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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