Growing Up Too Fast: Is Parentification harmful to children?

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Overview

- Definition and domains/types of parentification
- A conceptual model of parentification
- Theoretical perspectives
- Destructive vs. Adaptive parentification
- Latest research on parentification
- Assessment & intervention
- Social worker’s role
What is Parentification?

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

(Mika, Bergner, & Baum, 1987)

- (a) spousal role vis-a-vis parents
- (b) parental role vis-a-vis parents
- (c) parental role vis-a-vis siblings
- (d) nonspecific adult role-taking
Emotional vs. Instrumental
(Williams & Francis, 2010)

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

- Instrumental parentification
  - “My parent(s) discussed their financial issues and problems with me.”
  - “My parent(s) asked me to make decisions.”
Emotional parentification may be more harmful than instrumental parentification (Hooper, 2007; McMahon & Luthar, 2007; Tompkins, 2007).

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

- 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

- **Problem-solving parentification** (i.e., family relying on children to solve their problems)
- **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

- 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)

- Family needs
- Culture
- Capital
  - Parental
  - Social
Family Needs
(Burton, 2007)

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

- Mercedes, age 12, has been her mother’s translator since the age of eight.
- “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)

- Parents’ individual resources
- Time
- Psychological awareness and reserve
- Physical & mental health (e.g., depression, addiction)
- Parenting skills
... fais dodo, mon petit papa, fais dodo, et ne bois pas ton loloo...
In the Absence of a Parent

- Divorce
- Death of a parent
- Military families
- Incarceration of a parent
Social Capital

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

““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

- Birth order
- Gender
- Maturity
- Health status
Do Parentified Children Become Helping Professionals?

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

- Attachment theory (Bowlby)
- Family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974)
- Role theory (Ashforth, 2001)
What Parentified Children May Look Like

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

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

“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

- An increased sense of competence (Kuperminc et al., 2009)
- Enhanced coping (Fuligni, Alvarez, Bachman, & Ruble, 2005; Stein et al., 2007)
- A greater sense of happiness and role fulfillment (Telzer & Fuligni, 2009)
- Parent-child intimacy (Tompkins, 2007)
- Lower likelihood of engaging in sex (Sang, Cederbaum, & Hurlburt, 2014)
Continuum of Children’s Caretaking Roles
(Jurkovic, 1997)

- Destructive Parentification
- Adaptive Parentification
- Healthy Non-Parentification
- Infantilization
Long-Term Consequences of Childhood Parentification

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

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

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

Working-class & families in poverty
- Each family member is expected to contribute to the family system (Dudson & Dicker, 2004; Winton, 2003).

Immigrant families (Titzmann, 2012)
Parentification & Culture

“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)

- Emotional parentification was related to externalizing problems among European American children, but not among African American children.

Parentification & Gender

- Girls are at particular risk for parentification, esp. emotional caregiving (McMahon & Luthar, 2007).
- 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

“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

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

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

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

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

- Parent interventions should be aimed at enhancing their parenting skills.
- Parents should be aware of possible burdens that caretaking places on their children.
- Parents who are emotionally dependent on a child must learn to seek support from other adults.
- Involve the family: Help the client and family restore or reestablish the appropriate boundaries.
Parentified Adults
(Jankowski et al., 2013)

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