



Information

Parentified Children

A very subtle way to create damage in your child is to turn that child into your parent. This process is called parentification, not to be confused with parenting. Parentification can be defined as a role reversal between parent and child. A child's personal needs are sacrificed in order to take care of the needs of the parent(s). A child will often give up his/her own need for comfort, attention, and guidance in order to accommodate to the needs and care of logistical and emotional needs of the parent(s) (Chase, 1999).



In parentification the parent gives up what they are supposed to do as a parent and transfers that responsibility to one or more of their children. Hence the child becomes parentified.

Typically, a parentified child is someone who takes on many of the parenting responsibilities within the home.

This sometimes happens when a parent, for one reason or other, is unable to follow-through with their roles and responsibilities within the home. One example occurs when parents suffer from an addiction: they're inebriated and therefore unable to fulfill their duties and responsibilities as a mother or father. Other times, the parent is working several jobs and cannot be home when their children need them. As a result, one of the children (usually the eldest or the female in the family) begins to act like a parent to the other children (or a caregiver to the other parent). Hence, the term "parentified child."

While it can be normal and acceptable to have children take on some extra responsibilities within the home, when does it cross the line? When is it inappropriate or "too much"? The answer has to do with functioning and occupation.



Types of Parentification

Emotional Parentification: This type of parentification forces the child to meet the emotional needs of their parent and usually other siblings also. This kind of parentification is the most destructive. It robs the child of his/her childhood and sets him/her up to have a series of dysfunctions that will incapacitate him/her in life.

In this role, the child is put into the practically impossible role of meeting the emotional and psychological needs of the parent. The child becomes the parent's confidant. This can especially happen when a woman is not having her emotional needs met by her husband. She can gravitate towards trying to get these needs met from her son.

What child does not want to please their parent? An innocent child, is exploited by the parent and it creates a form of emotional and psychological abuse. This type of relationship can be the equivalent of emotional incest. Parentified children have to suppress their own needs. This comes at the expense of having normal development and causing a lack of a healthy emotional bond. These children will have difficulties having normal adult relationships in their future.

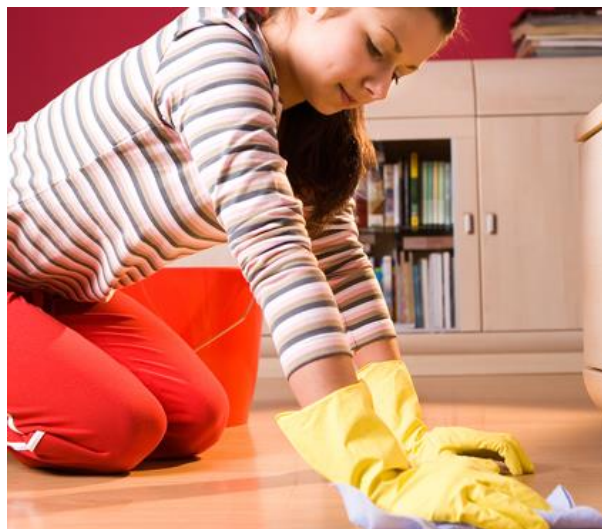
Instrumental Parentification: When a child takes up this role he/she meets physical or instrumental needs of the family. The child relieves the anxiety experienced normally by a parent that is not functioning correctly. The child may take care of the children, cook, etc. and by this essentially taking over many or all the physical responsibilities of the parent.

This is not the same as a child learning responsibility through assigned chores and tasks. The difference is that the parent robs the child of his childhood by forcing him/her to be an adult caregiver with little or no opportunity to just be a kid. The child is made to feel as a surrogate parent over the siblings and parent.

Future Problems as Adults

Intense Anger: Parentified children can become very angry persons. They will tend to have a love-hate relationship with their parent. Sometimes this adult child may not know why they are angry but will be angry at others, especially their friends, boyfriend/girlfriend, spouse, and children. They can have explosive anger or passive anger, especially when another adult happens to put expectations that might trigger their parental wounds of emotional exploitation.

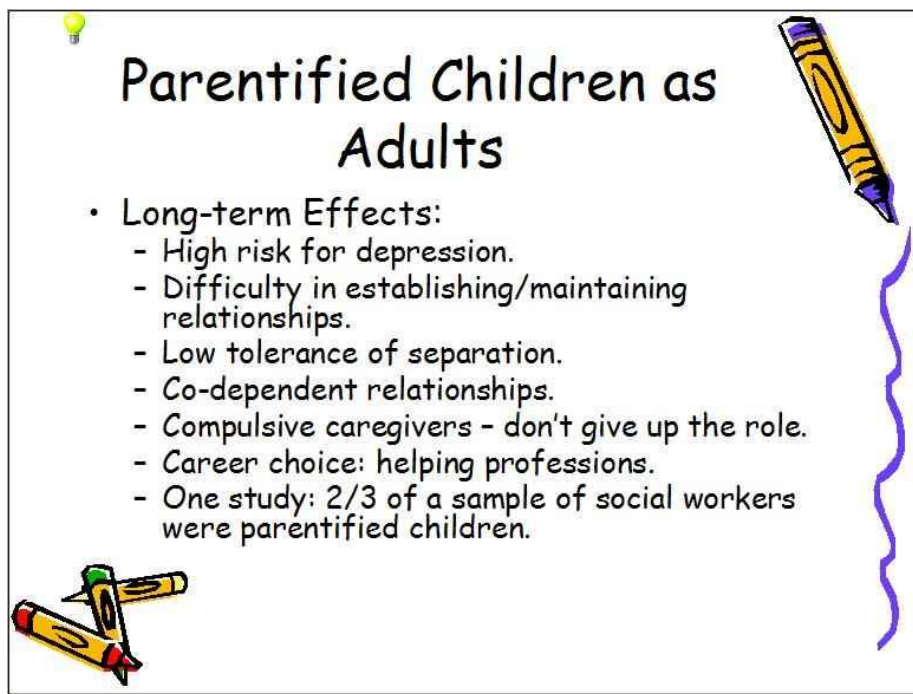
Difficulty with Adult Attachments: The parentified adult child can experience hardship in connecting with friends, spouse, and his/her children. This person could be operating out of deficits in knowing how to attach. Hence he/she could find it difficult to experience healthy intimacy in relationships. Relationships will tend to be distorted on some level.



Basically, a child's responsibility is to be a "child" and to go to school. This is their job – their main occupation – during childhood. They are to regularly attend school, build friendships, and do the things that most children do at their age. When a child is unable to regularly fulfill this role, however, then one needs to look at what is happening in this child's life. Specifically, one needs to look at

- (1) Behaviour at school (is there an unusual decline in their marks?);
- (2) Social and interpersonal life (Do they have many friends? Do they spend time with their friends outside of school?);
- (3) Physical and emotional health (Is the child regularly ill? Does the child act depressed and disinterested in other things? Does the child seem anxious or nervous about things?).

While there are many things that can affect a child's overall health, children who start taking on many of the parenting roles within the home can begin to develop anxiety, a problem that can remain with them as they enter adulthood.



Parentified Children as Adults

- Long-term Effects:
 - High risk for depression.
 - Difficulty in establishing/maintaining relationships.
 - Low tolerance of separation.
 - Co-dependent relationships.
 - Compulsive caregivers - don't give up the role.
 - Career choice: helping professions.
 - One study: 2/3 of a sample of social workers were parentified children.

This newsletter has been issued by:

TraumaCare, Box 1807, Magaliesview, Gauteng, 2067

www.traumacare.co.za * mail@traumacare.co.za * Tel: 071 592 9690

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