Parentification: Theoretical Framework, Risk Factors, and Psychosocial Outcomes

Ebeveynleşme: Kuramsal Çerçeve, Risk Faktörleri ve Psikososyal Sonuçları

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ABSTRACT

Parentification refers to the disruption of the hierarchical structure within the family, where parental duties and responsibilities are transferred to the child. Also known as a role reversal between parent and child, this situation can have detrimental effects when it is disproportionate to the child's developmental stage and abilities. However, when the child receives support from the parent and takes on responsibilities in a balanced way, parentification can also lead to positive psychosocial outcomes. The development of the parentification experience has been explained through certain theoretical perspectives, and various studies have been conducted on risk groups that may be affected by this experience. In this study, a narrative review method was used to examine national and international literature on parentification. Research findings were grouped under main themes such as types of parentification, risk factors, theoretical background, and its positive and negative psychosocial outcomes. Since parentification is still a relatively new topic in Türkiye, this review is one of the few studies that discusses the concept in a multidimensional way with support from recent literature. The aim of this study is to raise awareness about parentification in the field and to highlight areas that can be improved in future research. By synthesizing global and local perspectives, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of parentification's impact on child development. Furthermore, it underscores the need for culturally sensitive interventions to address the challenges and leverage the potential benefits of parentification in diverse family contexts.

Keywords: Parentification, role reversal, child neglect

ÖZ

Ebeveynleşme deneyimi, aile içerisindeki hiyerarşik yapının bozulması ve ebeveyne ait olan görev ve sorumlulukların çocuğa aktarılması sonucu ortaya çıkmaktadır. Ebeveyn ile rol değişimi olarak da adlandırılan bu durum, çocuğun gelişim süreci ve becerileriyle orantısız olduğunda çocuk üzerinde yıkıcı etkiler oluşturabilmektedir. Bununla birlikte, ebeveynin desteğinin alındığı ve görevlerin ölçülü biçimde üstlenildiği durumlarda ebeveynleşme olumlu psikososyal sonuçlar da doğurabilmektedir. Ebeveynleşme deneyiminin ortaya çıkış süreci belirli kuramsal açıklamalara dayandırılmış ve bu deneyimden etkilenebilecek risk grupları üzerine çeşitli araştırmalar gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu çalışmada ise narratif derleme yöntemi kullanılarak ebeveynleşme olgusu üzerine ulusal ve uluslararası alan yazında yürütülen çalışmalar gözden geçirilmiş; ebeveynleşmenin türleri, risk faktörleri, kuramsal çerçevesi, olumlu ve olumsuz psikososyal sonuçları kategorik başlıklar altında bir araya getirilerek aktarılmıştır. Ebeveynleşme kavramı ülkemizde görece yeni çalışılan bir kavram olduğundan bu derleme çalışması ebeveynleşmeyi çok boyutlu yapısıyla ve güncel çalışmalar doğrultusunda ele alan sınırlı sayıdaki makaleden biri haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışmayla alan yazında ebeveynleşme olgusuna dair farkındalık oluşturulması ve geliştirilmeye açık yönlerin vurgulanarak gelecekteki çalışmalara katkı sağlanması amaçlanmaktadır. Evrensel ve yerel bakış açılarını bir araya getiren bu inceleme, ebeveynleşmenin çocuk gelişimi üzerindeki etkisini kapsamlı bir şekilde anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca, farklı aile bağlamlarında ebeveynleşmenin getirdiği zorlukları ele almak ve potansiyel faydalarından yararlanmak için kültürel açıdan duyarlı müdahalelerin gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Ebeveynleşme, rol değişimi, çocuk ihmali

Introduction

One of the key factors influencing an individual's psychological well-being throughout life is the parenting style they experienced during childhood. Establishing healthy relationships with family members and receiving adequate care and support from parents significantly contribute to a person's mental health and personal development (Dunn et al. 2013). Research shows that individuals who received attention and support from their parents during childhood tend to report higher life satisfaction and greater psychological resilience in adulthood. Consequently, they develop enhanced flexibility in coping with negative life experiences (Jose et al. 2012, Masten and Monn 2015). For a family support system to function effectively, each member must take on specific roles and responsibilities. From a hierarchical perspective, parents are expected to be the caregivers and role models (Jacobvitz et al. 1999). However, in some cases, this structure may shift, with children assuming responsibilities that traditionally belong to parents. While it is normal for children to take on age-appropriate tasks, being forced to handle responsibilities beyond their capacity can lead to adverse outcomes (Minuchin et al. 1967, Köyden and Uluç 2018).

This role reversal between child and parent forms the basis of the concept of parentification (Minuchin et al. 1967). Sometimes unconsciously and sometimes knowingly, parents assign caregiving roles to the child, which can become a challenging experience. During development, children have fundamental needs such as material and physical support, secure attachment, and emotional closeness (Marotta 2003). In cases of parentification, these needs are often overlooked or deprioritized by the family. Consequently, the literature describes parentification as a subtle form of neglect and abuse (Schorr and Goldner 2023, Masiran et al. 2023).

Parentification has significant effects on children during their developmental years. A child who tries to meet the needs of their parents, and sometimes their siblings, often struggles with feelings of inadequacy, which can lower their self-esteem (Castro et al. 2004, Van Der Mijl and Vingerhoets 2017, Moksnes and Reidunsdatter 2019). Moreover, parentification has been associated with various psychological symptoms. Research shows that individuals who experienced parentification in childhood are more likely to suffer from depressive symptoms and anxiety in adulthood (Arellano et al. 2018, Burton et al. 2018), as well as eating disorders (Ketisch et al. 2014) and substance abuse problems (Dragan and Hardt 2016). Overall, parentification has been found to affect life satisfaction and well-being negatively (Williams 2015, Eşkisu 2021). While most of the literature emphasizes the negative outcomes of parentification, some studies also highlight its potential positive effects. Depending on various factors, individuals may develop different perceptions of their parentification experience; in some cases, they may even form a positive outlook. This perspective can help the person gain beneficial outcomes from their early caregiving role (East 2010, Borchet et al. 2017, Köyden and Uluç 2018).

Parentification has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, largely due to economic and sociodemographic changes reshaping family structures (Dariotis et al. 2023). Economic pressures requiring both parents to work, coupled with society's growing emphasis on individual success, have altered family dynamics. Work commitments often reduce the time parents spend at home. Additionally, an achievement-oriented mindset and the pursuit of perfection can lead to parents' feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Consequently, children may be expected to provide emotional support and comfort (Borchet et al. 2021a). These dynamics can shift household roles, increasing the likelihood of children assuming caregiving responsibilities and contributing to the rising prevalence of parentification. Similarly, broader societal changes and elevated stress levels can exacerbate parental conflicts, leading to higher divorce rates. Research suggests that parental conflict heightens family stress and the likelihood of parentification (Nuttal et al. 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified parentification's visibility. Economic hardships, loss of family members, emerging psychological challenges, and prolonged social isolation have disrupted family role distribution, resulting in more frequent parentification experiences among children (Dariotis et al. 2023). Collectively, these factors highlight parentification as a significant and current issue within contemporary family systems.

Despite its increasing relevance, literature reviews indicate that research on parentification, particularly in Turkish sources, remains limited. Few studies address the topic, and academic review articles are

especially scarce. This paucity of literature highlights the need to approach parentification as a multidimensional phenomenon, examining not only its psychopathological outcomes but also its connections to developmental processes and psychosocial contexts. This review article aims to provide a comprehensive framework by exploring the developmental background, theoretical foundations, potential risk factors, and psychosocial outcomes of parentification. Drawing on current research, the article also seeks to evaluate parentification through various variables and contextual factors, contribute theoretically to the field, and serve as a guiding resource for future studies.

The Concept of Parentification

The role reversal between child and parent was first introduced by Minuchin and colleagues (1967) using the term "parental child.". Since then, many theorists have attempted to conceptualize this phenomenon under various frameworks. Terms such as "role reversal," "parental child," "caregiving child," and "family hero" are some of the concepts used to describe parentification (Minuchin et al. 1967, Jurkovic 1997, Byng-Hall 2002).

Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) were the first to formally introduce the term 'parentification', which has since gained widespread acceptance in academic discourse. According to their definition, parentification occurs when family subsystems break down and boundaries become blurred, leading the child to assume responsibilities that typically belong to the parent. As a result of their new role, the child may find themselves responsible for household tasks, financial needs, or most commonly the emotional regulation and overall functioning of the family (Minuchin et al. 1967, Gelinas 1983). Over time, the child internalizes the need to meet the demands of family members, often at the expense of their own needs (Chase 1999). During this process, parents frequently fail to recognize the child's emotional struggles or signs of burnout and continue to delegate their responsibilities to them. In some cases, a parent may even begin to perceive the child as a substitute for their own parent (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 1973, Jurkovic 1997).

Types of Parentification

When examining types of parentification, two primary categories emerge in the literature: instrumental parentification and emotional parentification (Jurkovic 1997, Hooper 2007b, Champion et al. 2009). Instrumental parentification involves a child contributing to household functioning through physical tasks, such as preparing meals, doing laundry, cleaning, caring for siblings, or earning money to support the family (Chase 1999, Jurkovic et al. 1999, Hooper 2007b). In contrast, emotional parentification occurs when a child assumes social and emotional roles within the family, such as listening to a parent's personal problems, providing emotional support, acting as a confidant or mediator, or serving as a friend or partner to a parent (Minuchin 1974, Jurkovic et al. 1999, Akün 2017).

These two forms of parentification help identify the specific responsibilities a child assumes and their extent (Champion et al. 2009). Research indicates that both instrumental and emotional parentification are associated with feelings of anger and depressive symptoms (Żarczyńska-Hyla et al. 2019). Although both types place a significant burden on the child and negatively affect their psychological well-being, studies suggest that emotional parentification has a more detrimental impact than instrumental parentification (Earley and Cushway 2002, Hooper 2007b, McMahon and Luthar 2007).

Another classification, proposed by Jurkovic (1997), distinguishes between destructive and constructive parentification. Destructive parentification occurs when role reversal is prolonged and intense (Jurkovic 1997, Byng-Hall 2008, Jankowski et al. 2013). However, parentification is not always inherently negative. Under certain conditions, it can be constructive for the child (Chase 1999). For example, if the role reversal is temporary, responsibilities are reassigned to appropriate family members after a crisis, and the child's efforts are recognized and valued, parentification can have positive effects (Byng-Hall 2008, Saha 2016). When children feel seen and appreciated, they are less likely to feel isolated, and this emotional validation

can mitigate the potentially harmful effects of parentification (Jurkovic 1997, Hooper 2007, Schorr and Goldner 2023).

Another key distinction in the literature concerns the recipient of the child's caregiving. Parent-focused parentification occurs when the child takes responsibility for their parents, while sibling-focused parentification involves caregiving directed toward siblings (Tomeny et al. 2016). A recent study by Wilkins-Clark and colleagues (2024) found that adults who had assumed caregiving roles for their siblings reported higher stress levels and more depressive symptoms. A summary of the most frequently referenced types of parentification in the literature is presented in the following table (Jurkovic 1997, Jurkovic et al. 1999, Champion et al. 2009, Hooper 2009, Tomeny 2016).

Table 1. Types of parentification	
Emotional parentification	A form of parentification in which the child meets the emotional needs of the parent (e.g., closeness, emotional support, problem-solving).
Instrumental parentification	Involves taking on practical responsibilities within the household (e.g., cleaning, cooking) and/or contributing financially.
Constructive parentification	Refers to caregiving responsibilities that support the child's personal growth and development.
Destructive parentification	Occurs when caregiving tasks exceed the child's capabilities and have harmful long-term effects.
Parent-focused parentification	The caregiving role is directed toward meeting the needs of the parent(s).
Sibling-focused parentification	The caregiving role is primarily directed toward the child's siblings.

Theoretical Perspective on Parentification

Minuchin (1974), a key figure in conceptualizing parentification, significantly contributed to its theoretical foundation through structural family systems theory. According to this theory, the family comprises distinct subsystems, including parental, child, sibling, and spousal subsystems, each with specific roles and functions. The family operates as a dynamic whole through the interaction of these subsystems (Minuchin 1974). These interactions are organized hierarchically, and maintaining clear boundaries between subsystems is essential (İplikçi and Şahin-Acar 2019). Dysfunction in the parental or spousal subsystems, such as failure to fulfill responsibilities, can lead to boundary violations between parent and child subsystems. As a result, a child may assume parental responsibilities, disrupting the hierarchical structure and leading to parentification. Consequently, the child's needs, which parents should meet, remain unaddressed. When the child becomes a parent, they may expect their own children to fulfill those unmet needs, contributing to the intergenerational transmission of parentification (Akün 2017).

Another important framework enhancing the understanding of parentification is Bowlby's attachment theory. In early development, the primary caregiver, typically a parent, is responsible for meeting the child's basic needs. The bond formed between caregiver and child significantly shapes the child's psychological well-being and self-esteem in adulthood (Bowlby 1958). When a child can reliably seek support from the caregiver and have their needs met promptly and consistently, a secure attachment develops (Sümer 2017). Children with secure attachments tend to exhibit greater confidence in exploring their environment and better emotion regulation skills. Conversely, insecure attachment arises when the caregiver is emotionally or physically unavailable or meets the child's needs inconsistently.

Children with insecure attachments are more likely to experience emotional regulation difficulties, reduced self-esteem, and relational challenges later in life. Parentification is a key factor contributing to insecure attachment (Chase 1999, Byng-Hall 2002, Hooper 2007b). A child, though still dependent on care, may assume caregiving responsibilities to maintain the relationship with the caregiver, fostering compulsive caregiving behaviors (Bowlby 1979). Engelhardt (2012) found that girls with insecure attachment to their mothers were more likely to exhibit anxiety and depression in adulthood, alongside difficulties in intimate relationships. Additionally, Madden and Schafer (2016) reported that emotional

parentification was strongly associated with anxious and avoidant attachment styles, while instrumental parentification was specifically linked to avoidant attachment.

From a psychodynamic perspective, parentification can be examined through Winnicott's theory of the self (1965). Winnicott described the self as comprising two distinct parts: the true self and the false self. The true self reflects the natural, spontaneous expression of emotions and thoughts, emerging when a person feels free to be authentic. The false self, however, develops as a defensive structure in response to external expectations, often at the expense of authentic emotions. This adaptation is frequently linked to childhood neglect. The quality of the early relationship with the mother is critical to the development of these aspects of the self. When a child's physical and emotional needs are recognized and met, they are more likely to express themselves freely and develop an authentic, integrated self, fostering a natural and flowing true self. However, when the mother fails to respond to the child's needs and prioritizes her own desires, the child may adapt to the parent's ego ideals, suppressing their authenticity and constructing a false self to maintain the attachment. Within this framework, individuals who experience parentification may develop a false self due to unmet needs and emotional neglect by the caregiver (Winnicott 1965, Kohut 1977).

Structural family systems theory, attachment theory, and psychodynamic theory are among the most influential frameworks for examining parentification from different perspectives. Focusing solely on parentification as a dysfunction in family roles may overlook its profound effects on a child's emotional well-being, developmental process, and self-identity. These diverse theoretical approaches enable a more comprehensive and integrative understanding of the phenomenon. For instance, structural family systems theory explains parentification from a systemic viewpoint, highlighting how blurred family boundaries disrupt subsystems. However, it does not fully explore the internal motivations prompting a child to assume caregiving roles. Attachment theory addresses this gap by suggesting that a child may take on such responsibilities to maintain the caregiver relationship. The psychodynamic perspective further illuminates the impact of these dynamics on the child's emerging sense of self. Thus, investigating parentification through multiple theoretical frameworks provides valuable insights into its emotional, cognitive, and behavioral effects on the individual.

Risk Factors Influencing the Experience of Parentification

Gender

Studies consistently show that girls are more likely than boys to experience parentification (Macfie et al. 2005, McMahon and Luthar 2007, Byng-Hall 2008, Schier et al. 2015, Żarczyńska-Hyla et al. 2019). Research indicates that girls tend to assume caregiving responsibilities at younger ages and more frequently than boys within the family context (Larson and Verma 1999, Zukow-Goldring 2002). This trend is often attributed to societal and cultural expectations that encourage girls to engage in caregiving roles and accept responsibility more readily (Carpenter and Meade-Pruitt 2008, Cook and Cook 2009). Both emotional and instrumental parentification affect girls more significantly than boys (Peris et al. 2008). Specifically, in parent-focused parentification, girls are more impacted compared to other subtypes (Jacobvitz et al. 1999). A recent study by Uluç and Köyden (2022) found that parent-focused and emotional parentification are significantly associated with psychological symptoms in women. Among adult populations, working women report higher levels of parentification and experience more negative outcomes compared to their male counterparts (Burnett et al. 2006).

Birth Order

Birth order significantly influences the experience of parentification. Studies indicate that caregiving responsibilities and parental roles are most often assigned to the eldest child in the family (Burnett et al. 2006, McMahon and Luthar 2007, East and Weisner 2009, Żarczyńska-Hyla et al. 2019). From a hierarchical perspective, firstborns may assume these roles due to their developmental advantage, which can make them feel more competent than their younger siblings (Hooper 2008). While some children voluntarily take

on these responsibilities, they are typically assigned by the parent, most often to the eldest daughter (Schier et al. 2015). A recent study by Kincaid et al. (2025) explored how mothers may exhibit favoritism or emotional closeness based on birth order. Findings suggest that mothers often display reverse-order favoritism, giving more attention to the youngest child, likely due to perceiving them as more dependent or in need of care. However, some mothers report feeling emotionally closer to the firstborn, particularly when they share similar life experiences or are close in age, often the eldest daughter (Kincaid et al. 2025). These findings clarify why birth order and gender are critical in understanding parentification. When a mother forms a close emotional bond with her eldest daughter, this child may become the primary source of emotional support, bearing the parent's emotional burden. Similarly, when the youngest child is favored, practical and emotional responsibilities are more likely to fall to older siblings. Research also indicates that being an only child poses a similar risk for parentification (Hetherington 1999, Titzmann 2012). When examining the relationship between birth order and types of parentification, instrumental parentification is often associated with being the eldest in large families, while emotional parentification is more commonly linked to being an only child or the youngest (McMahon and Luthar 2007, Cho and Lee 2019).

Culture

Studies exploring the impact of culture on parentification reveal significant differences between collectivist and individualist societies (Cho and Lee 2019). In many Southeast Asian cultures that value collectivism, serving elders, caring for parents, and assuming their responsibilities are considered cultural duties (Yew et al. 2017, Yeung et al. 2018). Similarly, in South Korean culture, showing respect for elders and meeting their needs is essential for maintaining family bonds (Jung et al. 2002). A study comparing college students in the United States and India found that Indian students viewed parentification more positively than their American peers (Jackson et al. 2016). Kağıtçıbaşı (1984) noted that family values in Turkish society emphasize relatedness and emotional closeness. Children are often expected to contribute to family life by helping with financial needs, caring for siblings, and supporting parents (Kağıtçıbaşı 2007). Despite the alignment of parentification with cultural values, research indicates that it can lead to psychological symptoms over time, including depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (East 2010, Khafi et al. 2014, Biedron 2019).

Socioeconomic Status

Another important factor affecting family life is socioeconomic status. Studies show that families with low socioeconomic levels are at greater risk of experiencing parentification (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 1973, Cho and Lee 2018, Haskan-Avcı et al. 2018). Financial difficulties in the family may require children to provide material support. Even when children do not contribute financially, they may still take on more responsibilities at home because financial stress keeps parents preoccupied (Chen and Panebianco 2020). Sometimes, it is not about financial struggles but the reality that both parents work, leaving children to take on domestic responsibilities (East and Weisner 2009). Besides long-term low income, sudden financial changes due to economic crises can also act as a risk factor for parentification (Jelastopulu and Tzoumerka 2013). While the disadvantages of this situation are often emphasized, some studies have found that contributing to the family income may help children from low-income families develop better money management skills (Chee et al. 2014). Interestingly, a study by Borchet and colleagues (2021b) found that parentification can also be high in families with high socioeconomic status. This propensity may be explained by parents having high expectations for their children in order to compare them with others or to feel proud of their achievements.

Divorce

Divorce is a significant life event that can change family dynamics and affect children's well-being (Frimmel et al. 2024). Since family roles are restructured during and after divorce, studies show a higher likelihood of parentification in families that go through this process (Perrin et al. 2013, Bertoni et al. 2015, Wilkins-Clark et al. 2024). Conflicts between parents are often part of the process leading up to divorce. In such situations, children may take on roles such as mediator or spokesperson for one parent. Children who

go through the challenges of divorce are more likely to show symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress (Hashemi and Homayuni 2017). After divorce, the absence of one parent may increase the responsibilities of the child, which raises their level of parentification (Leon and Rudy 2005, Peris et al. 2008, Fortin et al. 2011). A similar pattern is seen in cases where a parent has passed away (Peris and Emery 2005, Titzmann 2012). When looking at the types of parentification, divorce has been found to predict both emotional and instrumental parentification (Jurkovic et al. 2001, Parmiani et al. 2012, Perrin et al. 2013).

Family Members with Care Needs

When parents or siblings have certain psychological or physical disorders, they may be unable to fulfill their self-care or family responsibilities (Sharpe 2024). Research has shown that children with siblings with special needs (Arıkan Çolak 2019) or parents with physical illnesses (Thastum et al. 2008) tend to delay their own needs in order to help their families. As a result, they experience higher levels of parentification (Sears and Sheppard 2004). The severity and duration of the illness play a significant role in shaping the impact on the child. While temporary or short-term illnesses may not necessarily lead to harm, chronic conditions tend to increase the level of parentification. In cases where a parent has psychological disorders, emotional parentification is more common, and caregiving can become a particularly challenging experience for the child (Chen and Panebianco 2020). A study by Van Loon and colleagues (2017) involving children of parents with psychological problems revealed increased levels of parentification and a greater risk of internalizing problems.

Addiction, whether substance-related or behavioral, is a condition that leads to significant health issues as well as interpersonal and social problems, yet often persists despite negative consequences (Ögel 2008, Cüceler et al. 2022). When parents have a substance use disorder, they may become unable to fulfill their family responsibilities, leaving children to take care of them and manage specific household tasks. A study by Tedgård et al. (2019) found that children of parents with substance addiction assume more responsibilities, which increases parentification and affects the way they form relationships in adulthood. Similarly, multiple studies have shown that alcohol or substance addiction in parents is associated with both emotional and instrumental parentification in their children (Godsall et al. 2004, Pasternak and Schier 2012). When there are family members with physical disabilities, chronic illnesses, psychological disorders, or substance use disorders, children are often required to meet both the emotional and physical needs of those individuals, as well as take on greater responsibilities around the home (Sharpe 2024). These responsibilities place them at significant risk for experiencing parentification.

Psychosocial Outcomes of Parentification

Positive Outcomes

Although parentification is often associated with adverse outcomes in the literature, some studies indicate that it can also lead to positive results depending on various factors (Hooper 2007a, Yew et al. 2017, Dariotis et al. 2023). When children take on parental roles and responsibilities beyond their age, this may foster increased self-confidence, a sense of competence, maturity, improved communication skills, and the development of empathy (Jurkovic 1997, East 2010). In a study conducted by Jurkovic and Casey (2000), individuals with a history of parentification were found to be more effective in crisis management and better equipped in social relationships. Coping with the challenges encountered during parentification can enhance individuals' psychological resilience and coping skills (Tompkins 2007, Yew et al. 2017), potentially resulting in lower levels of depressive symptoms (Williams and Francis 2010). Karataş and Gündüz (2021) explored parentification in the context of self-differentiation. They observed that individuals who had experienced parentification and had high levels of self-differentiation were more objective when facing family-related situations. They were also better at setting boundaries and could respond to the needs of family members more calmly and positively. In some cases, when the caregiving responsibility involves siblings, the experience of parentification may even strengthen the bond between them (Tomeny et al. 2016).

When examining the positive outcomes of the parentification experience, two key concepts emerge: perceived fairness and perceived benefit (Jurkovic 1997, Hooper 2009). If the child perceives the rationale and extent of the responsibilities assigned during parentification as fair, this perception may serve as a protective factor against the negative consequences of the experience (Jurkovic et al. 2001). In a study by Hooper and Wallace (2010), perceived fairness in parentification was found to prevent the development of psychological symptoms potentially. Parental attitudes and the child's interpretation of the process are also critical. When parents acknowledge and appreciate the child's efforts during this period, parentification can enhance the child's self-confidence and the perceived benefit of the experience (Borchet et al. 2017, Köyden and Uluç 2018). Gender differences have also been noted, with perceived benefits of parentification reported to be higher among females (Uluç and Köyden 2022). Additionally, both perceived fairness and benefit are associated with higher levels of self-esteem (Borchet et al. 2017, Dariotis 2023).

Parentification is considered a form of neglect and abuse, as it involves failing to meet the child's own needs while assigning them parental responsibilities (Schorr and Goldner 2023). In this context, the positive outcomes of parentification have been linked to the concept of post-traumatic growth. A study by Hooper and colleagues (2008) found that emotional parentification was associated with post-traumatic growth and greater psychological resilience. Accordingly, it has been reported that, under certain circumstances, parentification may contribute to personal development (Dariotis 2023).

Negative Outcomes

Although parentification may yield some positive outcomes, it also involves risk factors that can negatively impact an individual's psychological resilience over the long term and contribute to the development of psychological symptoms (Eşkisu 2021). The responsibilities a child is forced to take on at home are often not aligned with their age or abilities. As a result, these demands can lead to decreased life satisfaction and emotional exhaustion (Williams 2015, Karataş and Gündüz 2021). One of the key areas in which signs of burnout are most evident is the child's academic life. Numerous studies have shown that the experience of parentification during childhood and adolescence can negatively affect academic performance (Mechling 2011, Nako 2015).

As a result of parentification, individuals may develop both internalizing and externalizing problems (Van Loon et al. 2017). Regarding internalizing problems, children who suppress their own emotions and needs in order to prioritize those of family members have been found to experience depression and anxiety disorders in adulthood (Burton et al. 2018, Cho and Lee 2019, Wilkins-Clark et al. 2024). Somatization, which often accompanies these disorders, is also considered among the adverse outcomes of parentification (Schier et al. 2015). Another internalizing consequence is the distortion in one's self-concept. Individuals who have experienced parentification often struggle with emotion regulation and tend to have low self-esteem (Chase 1999, Van Der Mijl and Vingerhoets 2017). Constantly striving to meet the demands of their parents or other family members, children may develop a distorted sense of self (Akün 2017). Because the responsibilities they take on often exceed their capabilities, they may begin to view themselves as inadequate and carry this perception into adulthood (Castro et al. 2004). In connection with this perceived inadequacy, perfectionistic tendencies are frequently observed among individuals with high levels of parentification (Say 2024). Parentification has also been linked to eating disorders (Rowa et al. 2001) and obsessive-compulsive symptoms (Yıldırım 2016). Self-harming behavior and aggression, which can emerge as consequences of parentification, are classified as externalizing problems (Macfie et al. 2005, Mechling 2011). Additionally, substance and alcohol use disorders are among the externalizing outcomes strongly associated with parentification (Shin and Hecht 2013, Williams 2015).

When examining the effects of parentification on interpersonal relationships, research shows that women who experienced parentification during childhood often face difficulties in their romantic relationships. In particular, increased mistrust in romantic partners and decreased relationship satisfaction are associated with father-focused parentification (Baggett et al. 2015). Furthermore, the emotional support typically provided by the father, particularly the fulfillment of the need for affection, is considered a protective factor against various psychological difficulties in adulthood (Schier et al. 2015).

Discussion

Parentification is a phenomenon in which a child is compelled to take on physical or emotional responsibilities that are developmentally inappropriate for their age and skills. Its effects can begin in childhood and extend into adulthood, potentially continuing throughout the individual's life. This review aimed to present the key dimensions of parentification comprehensively. The first part of the article discussed the historical development of the concept and its subtypes. While various theorists have proposed different subtypes of parentification, emotional and instrumental parentification have emerged as the most prominent. Among these, emotional parentification has been more frequently explored and discussed in the literature. According to existing findings, emotional parentification tends to have more detrimental effects on individuals compared to instrumental parentification. Although instrumental parentification is also associated with negative outcomes, studies that examine its impacts in depth remain limited. Increasing the number of future studies in this area would contribute to a better understanding of its psychological implications.

In the following section, the theoretical framework of parentification is outlined. The primary theories associated with the concept in the literature include structural family systems theory, attachment theory, and psychodynamic theory. Within this review, the influences of these theories on parentification are synthesized and presented. Although these theories provide valuable insights, the limited inclusion of alternative theoretical explanations in the literature results in a somewhat narrow conceptual framework. This highlights the need to expand the theoretical perspective in future research.

The studies reviewed in this article also indicate that certain risk factors contribute to the experience of parentification. Among the most frequently cited risk factors in the literature are gender, birth order, culture, socioeconomic status, parental divorce, and the presence of a family member requiring care. While these risk factors are discussed separately across various studies, this review brings them together to offer a more cohesive perspective. Since the majority of current research stems from international sources, the lack of studies focusing on risk factors within Turkish samples becomes a significant point of concern. Therefore, further studies are needed to understand better how cultural context shapes parentification in Turkish society. Such research would allow for a more comprehensive examination of the effects of gender roles and family dynamics specific to Turkish culture.

The studies show that parentification is not limited to the responsibilities taken on during childhood; instead, it has multilayered effects on an individual's psychosocial development throughout life. Adverse psychosocial outcomes commonly reported include psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive traits, low self-esteem, eating disorders, interpersonal difficulties, and substance use. These symptoms significantly reduce life satisfaction in adulthood. Given these findings, it is suggested that professionals working with children, adolescents, and adults assess both past and current patterns of parentification. Considering the experience of parentification can significantly contribute to the therapeutic process. Increasing awareness of parentification in academic and clinical settings may also serve as a valuable step toward preventive interventions. Although the literature mainly highlights the negative effects of parentification, some positive psychosocial outcomes have also been observed. Taking on responsibilities at an early age and successfully fulfilling them can lead to increased self-confidence, enhanced communication and empathy skills, greater psychological resilience, and better emotion regulation. However, these positive outcomes usually depend on specific conditions. The perceived fairness of the situation and proportionality of the responsibilities assigned play a crucial role. Therefore, for parentification to promote positive development, it is essential to respect the child's boundaries and adopt a supportive approach.

Conclusion

Although parent-child interactions have been studied through various theories and concepts in the literature, parentification has only recently entered academic discourse. Sociodemographic changes in many countries have elevated parentification as a concept gaining increasing attention in recent years.

However, research in our country remains limited compared to the extensive studies conducted internationally. This review synthesizes scattered research findings from the literature under categorical headings, examining the concept of parentification chronologically through both historical and contemporary studies.

Additionally, by identifying gaps in existing research, this work aims to guide future studies in the field. Recognizing parentification in family life, academia, and clinical settings is essential for developing preventive interventions and supportive psychosocial services. This review seeks to convey the multidimensional nature of parentification to readers and contribute meaningfully to the existing literature.

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