The Parentified Child, Grown Up

FAMILY ROLES · ADULT PATTERNS

When you looked after the grown-ups, and what it can mean now

Parentification describes a reversal of roles, where a child regularly takes on care that would usually belong to a parent (Jurkovic, 1997). It often happens for understandable reasons, such as a parent's illness, separation, addiction, money pressures or migration. Naming it is not about blame; it is about understanding patterns that can carry into adult life.



A role learned early can still shape how we care for others, and whether we let ourselves be cared for.

01 Two kinds of caretaking

many people experienced both

PRACTICAL

Running the household

Cooking, cleaning, managing money or paperwork, translating, or raising younger siblings, beyond what was expected for your age.

EMOTIONAL

Holding a parent's feelings

Being a parent's confidant, comforting them, keeping the peace, or managing their moods, often at the expense of your own feelings.

02 How it can show up in adult life

tick any that feel familiar

PATTERNS THAT CAN COST ME

- ☐ **Feeling responsible for everyone's wellbeing,** even in situations that are not mine to fix
- ☐ **Finding it hard to ask for help,** or to accept it when it is offered
- ☐ **Scanning other people's moods** and adjusting before they say anything
- ☐ **Feeling guilty when resting** or doing something just for myself
- ☐ **Feeling valued mainly when I am useful**
- ☐ **Being drawn to people who need rescuing,** or relationships that feel one-sided
- ☐ **Not knowing what I need or want,** because others came first
- ☐ **Grief or resentment** about a childhood that ended early

STRENGTHS I MAY HAVE GAINED

- ☐ **Reliability** and a strong sense of responsibility
- ☐ **Empathy** and sensitivity to others
- ☐ **Competence** in a crisis
- ☐ **Resourcefulness** and independence
- ☐ **Loyalty** and care for family
- ☐ **Other:** _____

03 Rules I may have learned

how true each feels now, 0–10

"My needs come last." ____ /10	*"If I stop, things will fall apart."* ____ /10	*"Other people's feelings are my job."* ____ /10
"Asking for help makes me a burden." ____ /10	*"I am only worthwhile when I am useful."* ____ /10	*"It is not safe to fall apart."* ____ /10

These rules often made sense in childhood. The question now is whether they still fit the life you have.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

A meta-analysis found that self-reported childhood parentification was linked with a range of adult difficulties, including anxiety and depression, though the overall association was small (Hooper et al., 2011). Outcomes vary widely: some people also report growth and strengths from these experiences (Hooper et al., 2008). Not everyone who took on care as a child will recognise these patterns.

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04 My role then

a few words is enough

What I took care of
practical tasks, and other people's feelings

Who I looked after
and why the family needed it at the time

What I missed out on
play, rest, being looked after, being a child

What or who helped me
people, places or strengths that supported me

05 Where I still hold the umbrella

the role in my life now

WHERE, OR WITH WHOM *family, partner, friends, work*	WHAT I DO FOR OTHERS *practically or emotionally*	WHAT IT COSTS ME *energy, time, my own needs*	WHAT I WOULD LIKE INSTEAD *a fairer balance*

06 My own needs

tick the ones I tend to overlook

- ○ Rest
- ○ Being looked after
- ○ Asking for help
- ○ Saying no
- ○ Play and fun
- ○ Time alone
- ○ Sharing my feelings
- ○ Not fixing things
- ○ Being listened to
- ○ _____

07 A more balanced view

both what it gave me and what it cost

THEN AND NOW

Seeing the role clearly

For example: "I learned early that my needs could wait, and that helped our family get through a hard time. I'm an adult now. I can still care for people, and I can also let them care for me."

08 Small shifts

one step in each, this week

1
A responsibility I can share or hand back
something that is not mine to carry

2
One way I will let someone care for me
accepting help, or asking for it

3
A limit I will hold
where, with whom, and what I will say

Looking back at a childhood like this can bring up grief or anger. Both are understandable, and a psychologist can help you work through them.

SOURCES

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