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A REVERDED RELATIONSHIP AS A TRAUMATIC CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE. PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

Odwrócona relacja jako traumatyczne doświadczenie z dzieciństwa. Ujęcie psychopedagogiczne

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Introduction

The phenomenon of the reversal of parental roles¹, that is, parentification, is most often considered in the context of family issues, its development, and disruptions in parental and educational functions. Researchers studying parentification refer to several theoretical concepts, among which systems theories, John Bowlby's attachment theory, and Social Relations Theory (SRT)² seem to explain this phenomenon in a complementary way. These approaches emphasize that from the moment of birth, a child seeks contact with a stronger adult, most often a caregiver. In a world deprived of support, a parentified child, "in order to survive emotionally (...) is obliged to activate the caregiving system toward the caregivers, instead of receiving care from them"³.

The concept of parentification was introduced into academic discourse in the 1970s by the psychiatrists Iván Boszormenyi-Nagy and Geraldine Spark. In the following years, the issue of the reversal of the family role order was taken up and further developed by researchers such

¹ In the scholarly literature, the reversed relationship (parentification) is sometimes used interchangeably with such terms as parental role inversion, filial responsibility, or role confusion (Żarczyńska, Zdaniuk, Piechnik-Borusowska, Karcz-Taranowicz, & Kromolicka, 2016, p. 201). The term *parentification* itself has its roots in psychodynamic thinking, while the reversed relationship refers to family therapy. Both terms, together with the expression *role reversal*, will be used interchangeably.

² Social Relations Theory (SRT) assumes that the process of socialization in the family is bidirectional, meaning that parents influence children, and children in turn influence parents. According to this theory, children who are being socialized actively participate in this process by either conforming to parental influences or contesting them. Children who reject the acceptance of parental roles often use avoidance strategies, such as apathetic, oppositional-defiant behaviors, somatization, or passivity. Parentified children are highly empathic and possess strong psychological resilience and social competencies.

³ K. Schier, *Dorośle dzieci. Psychologiczna problematyka odwrócenia ról w rodzinie*, Wyd. Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa 2023, p. 17.

as S. Minuchin⁴, Jurkovic⁵, J. L. Byng-Hall⁶, and Titzmann⁷. S. Minuchin⁸ noted that in families where parental competence is insufficient, a child may be delegated to fulfill adult roles. Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark pointed to the neglect of the child's needs in a family in which the child performs the duties of others, which may foster the intergenerational transmission of the role-reversal mechanism. The way roles are performed in the family is repeated across subsequent generations: a parent who was parentified in childhood expects instrumental and emotional support from their own children. Parentification constitutes a specific violation of the family's internal boundaries and causes the child to be bound by others, or to feel obliged to assume emotional, instrumental, and sometimes financial responsibility toward the other members of the family⁹.

In Poland, the works of K. Schier are invaluable for recognizing the phenomenon of the reversal¹⁰ of parental relationships. She emphasizes the traumatic nature of the experiences of parentified children and points to the developmental repercussions of this process. Originally, in the literature on the subject, premature becoming-an-adult within family life consisted in a role reversal between child and parent and had an adaptive character. Such healthy parentification, distinct from traumatic parentification, gave children the opportunity to develop a sense of responsibility and fostered a sense of effectiveness and agency¹¹. In its current understanding, however, the concept of parentification is not equated with a sense of responsibility that may result from the specific family situation of parentified children, for example, parental emigration or the illness of a parent or sibling¹².

Chase's definition made it possible to identify those areas of family functioning in which children are most often parentified in a destructive way. As the author writes, "parentification in the family is associated with a functional and/or emotional role reversal in which the child sacrifices his or her own needs for attention, safety, and developmental support in order to accommodate and care for the instrumental or emotional needs of the parent"¹³. Destructive parentification instills in children the conviction that they must constantly provide for their parents and becomes part of their self-image.

Destructive role reversal may encompass two areas of family life. This division was proposed by Jurkovic¹⁴:

⁴ S. Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, MA: Harvard Press i London: Tavistock, Boston 1974, p. 74

⁵ G. Jurkovic, *Lost childhoods. The Plight of the Parentified Child*, Brunner/Mazel Publishers, New York 1997, p. 25.

⁶ J. Byng-Hall, John, *The significance of children fulfilling parental roles: Implications for family therapy*, „Journal of Family Therapy” 2008, 30, p. 12. Available online :<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6427.2008.00423.x> (accessed on 17 February 2026).

⁷ P. F. Titzmann, *Growing Up Too Soon? Parentification Among Immigrant and Native Adolescents in Germany*, „Journal of Youth and Adolescence 2011, 41(7), pp. 880-93.

⁸ S. Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, MA: Harvard Press i London: Tavistock, Boston 1974, p. 62.

⁹ I. Böszörményi-Nagy, G. M. Spark, *Invisible loyalties: reciprocity intergenerational family therapy*. Harper@Row, Nowy Jork 1973, p. 32.

¹⁰ Originally, in the literature on the subject, premature becoming-an-adult within family life consisted of a role reversal between the child and the parent and had an adaptive character.

¹¹ L. Burton, *Childhood adultification in economically disadvantaged families. A conceptual model*. „Family Relations” 2007, 56, p. 333.

¹² K. Schier, *Dorośle dzieci. Psychologiczna problematyka odwrócenia ról w rodzinie*, Wyd. Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa 2023, p. 25

¹³ N. D. Chase, *Parentification: An overview of theory, research, and societal issues*. In: N. D. Chase (ed.), *Burdened Children. Theory, Research, and Treatment of Parentification*. Sage Publications, London 1999, p. 5.

¹⁴ An analysis of the available tools for measuring parentification shows that their creators focus on different dimensions of this phenomenon, which is reflected in the construction of the questionnaires. The best-known dimensions of parentification refer to its type, that is, instrumental and emotional parentification, as well as its possible consequences (Jurkovic, 1997, p. 147).

1. Existential parentification, also called instrumental parentification, refers to a situation in which the child takes care of the physical well-being of family members by performing household chores, obtaining financial resources, caring for siblings, and looking after ill members of the family, including siblings and parents.

2. Emotional parentification. This type of reversal serves to satisfy the emotional and social needs of the parent or caregiver through the child. A child in a reversed relationship takes on the role of caregiver, confidant, consultant, and advisor, mediates tensions arising between the parents, and helps regulate their emotions¹⁵. Care for the emotional needs of parents or siblings may manifest itself in concern for their psychological well-being and sensitivity to the moods of other family members¹⁶. In order to maintain positive feelings within the family, a child experiencing emotional parentification may also be cast in the role of caregiver looking after a sick family member, scapegoat, therapist, confidant, or substitute partner in the event of the parents' separation (spousification)¹⁷. Both types of parentification may occur independently or jointly.

Some researchers believe that instrumental parentification is less harmful than emotional parentification¹⁸. Byng-Hall¹⁹ notes that children adapt more easily to instrumental roles and duties than to emotional ones, because the latter expose them to a higher level of psychological and emotional costs associated with stress. This stress results from a sense of responsibility for another person. It should be noted, however, that the dimensions of parentification distinguished by Jurkovic do not exclude one another. Children may perform different roles within the family, and both types of parentification, that is, emotional and instrumental, may occur simultaneously and be equally burdensome for the child²⁰.

The second classification of parentification proposed by Jurkovic also focuses on the positive and negative consequences of parentification experienced by children. Jurkovic²¹ distinguishes between constructive (adaptive) and destructive (pathological) parentification. Parentification may be understood as a form of emotional abuse if it excessively burdens the child with roles usually assigned to adults and in this way prevents children from carrying out

¹⁵ As the author writes, "some parents carry within themselves a great deal of anger, frustration, and dissatisfaction with life, and they look for someone to blame for this state. It happens that, without being aware of the harm they are causing, they shift the responsibility onto their children" (Kościelska, 2011, p. 62).

¹⁶ G. Jurkovic, *Lost childhoods. The Plight of the Parentfield Child*, Brunner/Mazel Publishers, New York 1997, p. 24; L. M. Hooper, S. A. Marotta, R. P. Lanthier, *Predictors of growth and distress following childhood parentification: A retrospective exploratory study*, „Journal of Child and Family Studies” 2008, 17, p. 696; L.M. Hooper, *The application of attachment theory and family systems theory to the phenomena of parentification*, „The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Families and Couples” 2007, 15, p. 222..

¹⁷ L. M. Hooper, *Parentification*, in: *Encyclopedia of adolescence*, R. J. R. Levesque (ed.), NY: Springer, New York 2012, pp. 2024; L.M. Hooper, *Assessing parentification in South American college students: A factor analytic study of a Spanish version of the Parentification Inventory*, „Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development” 2014, 42, p. 98. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2014.00047.x> (accessed on 17 February 2026).

¹⁸ G. Jurkovic, *Lost childhoods. The Plight of the Parentfield Child*, Brunner/Mazel Publishers, New York 1997, p. 27; L. M. Hooper, S. A. Marotta, R. P. Lanthier, *Predictors of growth and distress following childhood parentification: A retrospective exploratory study*, „Journal of Child and Family Studies” 2008, 17, p. 697.

¹⁹ J. Byng-Hall, John, *The significance of children fulfilling parental roles: Implications for family therapy*, „Journal of Family Therapy” 2008, 30, p. 149. Available online :<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6427.2008.00423.x> (accessed on 17 February 2026).

²⁰ G. Jurkovic, *Lost childhoods. The Plight of the Parentfield Child*, Brunner/Mazel Publishers, New York 1997, p. 202; P. K. Kerig, *Revisiting the construct of boundary dissolution: A multidimensional perspective*, „Journal of Emotional Abuse” 2005, 5, p. 8. Available online: https://doi.org/10.1300/J135v05n02_02 (accessed on 17 February 2026).

²¹ G. Jurkovic, *Lost childhoods. The Plight of the Parentfield Child*, Brunner/Mazel Publishers, New York 1997, p. 23.

their own developmental tasks²² and from enjoying the privileges of childhood²³. A situation that exceeds the capacities of children or adolescents and depletes their psychological resources usually leads to negative, and sometimes traumatic, consequences. A review of research on parentification showed a relationship between parentification and anxiety disorders, personality disorders, and eating disorders in children²⁴. Moreover, the literature suggests that parentification is associated with the future abuse of psychoactive substances²⁵.

The final classification, discussed by Hooper²⁶, distinguishes between parent-focused parentification and sibling-focused parentification. In families where there is a disturbed hierarchy of roles and blurred boundaries, and thus a reversal of parental roles, the child takes over the duties of an adult caregiver and performs them:

1. directly toward the parent, in an instrumental form if the parent is ill or disabled, or through emotional support in a crisis situation such as divorce,
2. or indirectly, by caring for siblings and carrying out practical tasks or looking after the well-being of brothers and sisters.

In this way, Hooper emphasizes the multiplicity of roles a child may perform in relation to different family members and the impact of those roles on the functioning of the entire family system, individual subsystems (for example, siblings), and the parent-child dyad. The situation of an only child in the family is particularly difficult in the context of parentification. Such children usually receive a great deal of positive reinforcement, but also criticism, anger, fear, and anxiety from their parents. Emotionally immature parents are aware of the fact that the child is the sole recipient of their reactions, and this may lead to serious consequences (Hooper, 2008, p. 698)²⁷. A parentified only child is more burdened by family crisis, which results in higher levels of aggression and depression in only children compared with children who have siblings, as well as increased school difficulties²⁸.

According to Jurkovic, a diagnostic analysis of the phenomenon of parentification should include such elements as: the explicitness of messages indicating the child's tasks; the type of work the child performs; the degree of responsibility involved in the tasks entrusted to the child; the level of adequacy of the tasks to the child's developmental age; the nature of the boundaries within the family system; and the ethical and social evaluation of the child's involvement in family matters. The destructive character of role reversal in the family is marked by the repetitive nature of events and by the burden it places on the child²⁹.

Research shows that a certain degree of parentification is part of every child's experience and may have positive significance for development. "Healthy parentification," as Nancy D.

²² G. Jurkovic, *Lost childhoods. The Plight of the Parentfield Child*, Brunner/Mazel Publishers, New York 1997, p. 24.

²³ K. Schier, *Gdy dziecko staje się rodzicem – odwrócona troska, czyli zjawisko parentyfikacji w rodzinie* [When a child becomes a parent – reversed care, the phenomenon of parentification in the family]. In *Bliskość w rodzinie. Więzy w dzieciństwie a zaburzenia w dorosłości* [Closeness in the family. Ties in childhood and disorders in adulthood]. Edited by Barbara Tryjarska, Wyd. Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2010, p. 69.

²⁴ L. M. Hooper, *The application of attachment theory and family systems theory to the phenomena of parentification*. *The Family Journal*, „Counselling and Therapy for Families and Couples” 2007, 15, p. 222.

²⁵ N. Chase, M. P. Deming, M. C. Wells, *Parentification, parental alcoholism, and academic status among young adults*, „American Journal of Family Therapy” 1998, 26, p. 112. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01926189808251091> (Accessed on 20 February 2026).

²⁶ L. M. Hooper, *The application of attachment theory and family systems theory to the phenomena of parentification*. *The Family Journal*, „Counselling and Therapy for Families and Couples” 2007, 15, p. 219.

²⁷ L. M. Hooper, S. A. Marotta, R. P. Lanthier, *Predictors of growth and distress following childhood parentification: A retrospective exploratory study*, „Journal of Child and Family Studies” 2008, 17, p. 698.

²⁸ P. B. Sorensen, *Changing positions: Helping parents, look through the child's eyes*, „Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry” 2005, 46(2), p. 156.

²⁹ G. Jurkovic, *Lost childhoods. The Plight of the Parentfield Child*, Brunner/Mazel Publishers, New York 1997, p. 52.

Chase writes³⁰, may stimulate the development of responsibility in children and foster a sense of efficacy and goal orientation, provided that children are shown gratitude through affirming messages. Such a practice may protect children from destructive parental dependency. Healthy parentification may also support the development of resilience in children. Resilience, or psychological hardiness, is the ability to recover from difficult life situations, the capacity to regenerate after trauma. This kind of resilience, which parentification may foster, can strengthen a child's psychological development and support the building of healthy emotional relationships.

A child experiencing destructive role reversal internalizes the belief that they must be a caregiver to other people, not only to their parents. Such an attitude may lead to the formation of a negative identity and become a source of disturbances in the development of self-image in the future.

In assessing the destructive process of instrumental or emotional exploitation of the child, great importance should be attached to evaluating the balance of roles in the parent-child dyad. An important criterion in assessing the burden of parentification is whether the child is rewarded and whether their previous effort is acknowledged. Appropriate recognition of the child's role may be a protective factor. A child who is aware that they may, but do not have to, assist their parents in carrying out tasks proper to the parental role has a chance to withdraw from that role without feeling guilty.

When describing the phenomenon of parentification, attention should also be paid to one more aspect, namely the degree to which the role assigned to the child in the family is internalized, and thus the degree to which the child identifies with that role³¹: the higher the degree of internalization, the greater the threat to the child's psychological functioning, and the more difficult it becomes to maintain emotional and psychological distance, as well as to define and pursue one's own needs and developmental tasks. It seems appropriate here to refer to M. Bowen's concept³², in which he describes the phenomenon of family projection, characterized by the child's great sensitivity to patterns of the parents' emotional behavior, leading to weak differentiation of self and, as a result, to a high susceptibility to anxiety and frustration in the future³³. This emotional hypersensitivity of children who are excessively burdened emotionally and/or instrumentally in their families appears to be a significant consequence of role reversal.

2. The Effects of Parentification as a Traumatic Childhood Experience

Parentification is associated with reducing tension and anxiety present in the family system by relieving parents of the responsibility connected with their parental role and shifting their duties onto the children³⁴.

The effects of parentification on children depend on the developmental stage at which this process was initiated. The earlier the role reversal occurs, the more significant the repercussions for the child. In the literature on the subject, parentification is increasingly understood as a particular type of trauma involving emotional abuse, inadequate care of the child, neglect, and/or physical abuse and sexual abuse. To a large extent, parentification meets the criteria indicating an event of a traumatic nature. Referring to the criteria developed by R.

³⁰ N. D. Chase, *Parentyfikacja: An overview of theory, research, and societal issues*, in: *Burdened Children. Theory, Research, and Treatment of Parentification*, N. D. Chase (ed.), Sage Publications, London 1999, p. 6.

³¹ K. Schier, *Gdy dziecko staje się rodzicem – odwrócona troska, czyli zjawisko parentyfikacji w rodzinie [When a child becomes a parent – re versed care, the phenomenon of parentification in the family]*, in: *Bliskość w rodzinie. Więzy w dzieciństwie a zaburzenia w dorosłości* [Closeness in the family. Ties in childhood and disorders in adulthood]. Edited by Barbara Tryjarska, Wyd. Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2010, p. 64.

³² H. Goldenberg, I. Goldenberg, *Terapia Rodzin*, Wyd. Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2006, p. 128.

³³ Ibidem, p. 168.

³⁴ L. M. Hooper, *The application of attachment theory and family systems theory to the phenomena of parentification. The Family Journal*, „Counselling and Therapy for Families and Couples” 2007, 15, p. 218.

G. Tedeschi and L. G. Calhoun³⁵, L. M. Hooper indicates that destructive parentification, like any other traumatic event:

1. is sudden in nature;
2. involves a loss of control over the situation;
3. places demands that go beyond previously available ways of coping with difficult situations;
4. has long-term consequences for the child's psychological and physical functioning.

According to the researcher, "parentification often leaves the child with the impression that he or she has no control over the traumatic situation. Secondly, when a child experiences parentification for the first time, depending on age, maturity, and level of development, the child also experiences a sense of inadequacy, feeling poorly equipped to bear the role of a parent in the family (...) parentification may lead to, and does lead to, long-term problems in children's functioning in the future"³⁶.

A child burdened with adult roles, placed in a situation that exceeds and exhausts their cognitive and emotional resources, is exposed to many negative consequences. An unfavorable upbringing environment may be a source of trauma and stress, as confirmed in the studies of D. Cicchetti³⁷ and S. P. Kubiak³⁸. Children who are excessively burdened with duties and function like adults find themselves in a situation beyond their capacities and one that depletes their innate potential. Parentification of this kind may in the future result in the abuse of psychoactive substances by parentified children, mental disorders, difficulties in peer relationships, and an increased risk of poor parenting competencies. Children traumatized by reversed relationships and experiencing neglect from their parents show greater reactivity to traumatic events than their peers.

One of the consequences of role reversal in the family experienced by children is depression. This relationship is confirmed by the results of research conducted by J. Hardt and K. Schier³⁹ on a group of 442 individuals. The participants in the study exhibited somatoform disorders, that is, disorders manifested in bodily form. As van der Kolk writes, excess stress and inadequate demands cause the "body [to] keep the score"⁴⁰. The results obtained confirmed that a highly predictive factor for depression is parentification on the part of the mother. The risk of depression increased among the respondents with age and was determined by the sex of the respondents. Emotional parentification may contribute to the development of disturbances in psychological functioning such as depression⁴¹.

Numerous studies show that emotional parentification has particularly negative consequences for children's later emotional functioning, especially in their adult lives⁴². In the process of assigning the child to the role of parent, emotional neglect on the part of the parents

³⁵ R. G. Tedeschi, I. G. Calhoun, *Trauma and Transformation*, CA: Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks 1995, p. 168.

³⁶ L. M. Hooper, *The application of attachment theory and family systems theory to the phenomena of parentification*. *The Family Journal*, „Counselling and Therapy for Families and Couples” 2007, 15, p. 219.

³⁷ D. Cicchetti, *An Odyssey of Discovery: Lessons Learned through Three Decades of Research on Child Maltreatment*, „*American Psychologist*” 2004, 59, p. 736.

³⁸ S. P. Kubiak, *Trauma and Cumulative Adversity in Women of a Disadvantaged Social Location*, „*American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*” 2005, 75, p. 452.

³⁹ K. Schier, *Dorośle dzieci. Psychologiczna problematyka odwrócenia ról w rodzinie*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa 2023, Wyd. Naukowe SCHOLAR, p. 171.

⁴⁰ B. A. van der Kolk, *Clinical implications of neuroscience research in PTSD*, „*Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*” 2006, 1, p. 281.

⁴¹ J. Hardt, K. Schier, M. Dragan, *Retrospektywna ocena dziecięcych doświadczeń osób dorosłych. Aspekty teoretyczne i metodologiczne*, in: *Metody diagnozy w psychologii klinicznej dziecka i rodziny*, M. Świącicka (ed.), Wyd. Paradygmat Warszawa 2011, , p. 171.

⁴² G. Jurkovic, *Lost childhoods. The Plight of the Parentified Child*, Brunner/Mazel Publishers, New York 1997, p. 54.

must be regarded as especially important. Parentified children, absorbed in the needs of their parents, do not recognize within themselves those areas that require care. This form of emotional neglect on the part of the parents leads to poor emotional regulation in children. All children need parental help in regulating such strong emotions as rage, frustration, or stress. The main task of parents is to help a child experiencing a state of intense emotional dysregulation return to a state of emotional control, and thus to a sense of psychological well-being. Z. Freud emphasized the importance of emotional regulation, especially in younger children⁴³. In early childhood, they are not yet prepared to cope with the many stimuli reaching them from the outside⁴⁴. Emotional neglect of children in the first years of life may lead to disturbances in emotional regulation or its weakening. This situation carries serious neurobiological consequences.

Role reversal in the family affects the child's overall development. As K. Schier writes: "people who cared beyond their strength, instrumentally or emotionally, for their parents (...) exhibit low self-esteem and experience intensified shame and guilt. "They often devalue their bodies and suffer from sexual disorders and psychosomatic illnesses"⁴⁵. A reversed hierarchy of roles within the family may contribute to the disruption or delay of social roles appropriate to a given developmental stage, disturb the process of separation-individuation, and also resonate in the building of healthy relationships in the future⁴⁶. A child excessively burdened with duties and replacing adults within the family system may neglect their own school responsibilities, which in the future is associated with a lower level of educational attainment. School or academic success depends on engagement, the ability to focus attention on a task, and goal orientation. For parentified children, achieving school results adequate to their actual abilities is difficult because they are too burdened by the demands of their environment.

The consequences resulting from taking over parental tasks, the way the child perceives their role, whether as a factor threatening the fulfillment of other life roles or as something unfair, or as something enabling the child to acquire new skills and develop positive personality traits, constitute an important diagnostic criterion in assessing the harmfulness of parentification.

Considering this dimension of parentification may be particularly important in Poland due to specific cultural conditions connected with a large power distance in parental authority within the family, as well as respect for hierarchy and loyalty toward the family⁴⁷. With a strong parent-child hierarchy in vertical relationships, the child accepts the tasks assigned to them as normative and imposed from above; even if these tasks are burdensome and prevent the child from carrying out developmental tasks, the child will feel obliged to fulfill them. Moreover, in times of unfavorable transformations in family life, consisting in increasing numbers of

⁴³ Emotional regulation is of particular importance for the development of children's psyche and brain structures. Thanks to its proper functioning, systems of stress regulation are formed in the brain, enabling the child to cope with the stressors that life brings. Consistent emotional regulation provided by parents causes the descending neural pathways to naturally inhibit primitive fight-or-flight responses in the future.

⁴⁴ S. Freud, *Zahamowania, symptomy i lek*, in: *Histeria i lek*, S. Freud (ed.), Wyd. KR, Warszawa 2009, p. 199.

⁴⁵ K. Schier, *Dorośle dzieci. Psychologiczna problematyka odwrócenia ról w rodzinie*, Wyd. Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa 2023, p. 8.

⁴⁶ M. Wolska, *Rodzinna lojalność*, in: *Kontakty z ludźmi „innymi” jako problem wychowania, opieki i resocjalizacji*, B. Kosek-Nita, D. Raś (ed.), Wyd. Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 2000, p. 58.

⁴⁷ G. Hofstede, *Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context*. Online, „Readings in Psychology and Culture” 2011, 2(1), p. 3. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1014> ((accessed on 12 February 2026)).

divorces, single parenthood, reconstructed families, and the absence of parents (permanent or temporary), this phenomenon takes on particular significance⁴⁸.

3. Psychopedagogical Support for Parentified Children

Psychopedagogical support for parentified children should include multidirectional activities in the psychological, pedagogical, clinical, and social dimensions.

The need to raise awareness of this problem in educational settings, as well as to reveal the effects of parentification and diagnose this phenomenon, requires thinking about it in a broader social context. Parentified children who did not receive support in time and did not work through their early childhood experiences have a greater tendency to reverse roles in relation to their own children, which in a broader perspective activates the transgenerational transmission of every form of violence hidden within the child-parent/caregiver relationship. A diagnosis made sufficiently early plays an important role in the process of restoring order to roles within the family system. If the child's involvement is noticed and appreciated early enough, the child may not develop symptoms characteristic of destructive parentification. Professional support from people outside the family, such as a psychologist, pedagogue, or teacher, may give the child an opportunity to work through the relationship with the parent and to experience substitute parenting within therapeutic contact. This kind of relationship may prove to be a "secure base" for the child. This concept was introduced into academic discourse by J. Bowlby and refers to the fundamental dimensions of good parenting. A secure base means the creation by the parent of such a psychological space as allows the child to develop and to undergo separation-individuation when ready for it. As J. Bowlby writes: "This role consists in being available, ready to respond when called upon to encourage and perhaps assist, but to intervene actively only when clearly necessary"⁴⁹.

Social prevention efforts for parentified children should include: presenting and discussing the phenomenon of reversed family relationships in the mass media; educating teachers and caregivers in diagnosing the conditions of this phenomenon, strategies for extinguishing symptoms, and avoiding reinforcement of excessive task orientation in children; appreciating the child's helpfulness and courage based on the FUKO communication rule (facts, feelings, consequences, expectations); and conducting educational activities for parents aimed at increasing parental knowledge about parentification and raising emotional awareness toward children's needs. Proposed directions of action to support parentified children are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Support for parentified children

Type of support	Benefits for a parentified child	Benefits for a parentified child
Individual therapy	Safe communication of emotions	Better understanding of the child's needs
Family therapy	- Improving relationships with parents. - Safe exchange of feelings.	- Changing dysfunctional communication patterns. - Restoring proper parenting roles. - Restoring psychological balance. - Fostering in parents a sense of

⁴⁸ J. Żarczyńska, B. Zdaniuk, J. Piechnik-Borusowska, E. Karcz-Taranowicz, B. Kromolicka, *Uwarunkowania parentyfikacji doświadczanej w dzieciństwie i okresie dorastania z perspektywy młodych dorosłych*, „Rocznik Andragogiczny” 2016, 23, p. 210.

⁴⁹ J. Bowlby, *A Secure Base. Clinical Applications of Attachment Theory*, Routledge Classics, Londyn – Nowy Jork 1988/2005, p. 12.

		responsibility for their child's development. - Raising awareness of children's needs and problems. - Equipping families with knowledge on how to cope with difficult and crisis situations.
Support from the school	- Learning group roles. - Assuming a group role.	- Cooperation with institutions
Support from social institutions and organizations (support groups, psychological and pedagogical counseling centers)	Support in everyday functioning.	- Relief from responsibilities. - Economic training. - Exploiting the family's individual and social resources in a solution-focused work model.

Source: own study.

Individual therapy creates a safe space for parentified children to work through difficult experiences in their relationships with their parents and provides an opportunity to undertake the work of mourning their own “childhood without childhood.” In this process, children have a chance to rebuild their self-esteem and appreciate their efforts so far.

In accordance with the basic paradigm of the systemic approach, family therapy should include work with the entire family system, aimed at correcting existing family patterns and restoring proper roles.

The tasks of a specialist supporting a parentified child should focus on:

- helping the child express hurt and anger associated with excessive burdens and responsibilities;
- helping the child appreciate themselves for having replaced the parent;
- teaching the child to allow others to care for their needs;
- making the child aware that they deserve care regardless of their psychological and physical condition;
- making the young caregiver aware that they are not responsible for their parents' moods, feelings, or physical and mental health;
- helping the child grieve the losses resulting from the experience of parentification.

Of key importance for the professionalization of support measures in the area of assistance for children and families experiencing parentification is the integration of intervention strategies.

As H. Cudak writes, in a situation of parentification, “family dysfunction causes disturbances in emotional and interpersonal relations between the parents and between the parents and the children. The climate of home life becomes disturbed, creating a traumatic atmosphere of family life. The child’s psychological needs are not satisfied, and family life becomes disorganized. In a dysfunctional family, there is a lack of educational and life goals. Meanwhile, the caregiving and educational methods present in the family are occasional, often non-pedagogical, causing children to become maladjusted to social needs, values, and goals”⁵⁰. (2011, p. 8). In dysfunctional families, the “negative atmosphere (...) is characterized by indifference in relations between family members, a lack of a sense of security, emotional

⁵⁰ H. Cudak, *Dysfunkcje rodziny i jej zagrożenia opiekuńczo-wychowawcze*, „Pedagogika Rodziny. „Family Pedagogy” 2011, 1(2), p. 8.

isolation, nervousness, and uncertainty in the psychological and social life of the family community” (Cudak, 2011, p. 10)⁵¹; hence preventing role reversal requires actions at many levels, as presented below (Table 2).

Table 2. Preventive strategies in situations of parentification.

Preventive strategies	Benefits for a parentified child	Benefits for a parentified child
Even division of responsibilities	The right to childhood and the realization of one's own developmental tasks	Better organization of family life
Seeking external support	Protection against excessive liability	Relief in coping with crises
Parental education	Meeting emotional needs	Greater awareness of one's own parenting competencies. A sense of empowerment.

Source: own study.

4. Conclusions

This article seeks to examine parentification as a distinct form of the parent-child relationship that can take on a traumatic character. A significant majority of studies on parentification conducted worldwide refer in their theoretical assumptions to attachment theory and systems theory⁵². This perspective is valid because it makes it possible to understand the phenomenon of parentification in a broader multigenerational context and its consequences in the context of a disturbed bond with the attachment figure. By entering the role of the parent, the child assumes responsibility for the material and/or emotional situation of the other family members⁵³.

The analysis of the relevant literature showed that parentification is a multidimensional and complex phenomenon, conditioned by numerous factors and causing psychopedagogical consequences in the child's development. The nature of these consequences will depend to a large extent on the stage of development at which parentification was initiated, what the parents' expectations of the child are, what tasks the child has been burdened with, whether these tasks are adequate to the child's competencies and emotional resources, whether the child had a sense of loss and harm, and to what extent, as a result of role reversal, the child was forced to give up fulfilling their own developmental needs, whether cognitive, emotional, educational, relational, or social.

There is a need to distinguish destructive parentification from related processes, such as functional parentification, in which children may assist their parents in carrying out parental functions and support them without having to exceed their own capacities. If these obligations are not adapted to the child's situation and psychophysical condition, they turn into parentification. A moderate intensification of parentification, as a normative response to a temporary family crisis, may bring positive long-term effects for the child's development, such

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

⁵² L.M. Hooper, *The application of attachment theory and family systems theory to the phenomena of parentification. The Family Journal*, „Counselling and Therapy for Families and Couples” 2007, 15, p. 219.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 221.

as increased self-esteem, efficacy, empathy, or altruism⁵⁴. A child's temporary assumption of the role of an adult family member may have a positive effect on their development, provided that the following conditions are met: 1. the reversal of hierarchy is temporary and does not constitute a permanent pattern of family functioning; 2. the child is clearly informed about the duties they are to undertake and feels that the other family members are grateful for the work performed; 3. the child's needs are noticed; 4. the parents accompany the child in their development, provide reasonable freedom, nurture a sense of autonomy, and create a supportive emotional climate in the family.

Supporting parentified children and their families requires both individual and societal interventions. Parentification, or the inverted relationship, requires further research, as a thorough understanding of this phenomenon is essential for developing effective prevention strategies and supporting affected children and their families. Further research is needed to provide a thorough understanding of this phenomenon.

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⁵⁴ G. Jurkovic, *Lost childhoods. The Plight of the Parentfield Child*, Brunner/Mazel Publishers, New York 1997, p. 44.

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