

# The Psychological Effects of Parentification in Girls within Single-Parent Families

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Parentification, the process whereby children assume roles and responsibilities typically associated with those of a parent, has been identified as a phenomenon with significant psychological implications, particularly within single-parent families. This study aims to explore the psychological effects of parentification on girls living in single-parent households, focusing on their emotional, social, academic, and personal development.

**Methods and Materials:** Employing a qualitative research design, this study collected data through semi-structured interviews with 21 girls aged 13 to 18, who were identified as assuming adult roles within their single-parent families. Theoretical saturation was achieved to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Data analysis followed a thematic approach, allowing for the identification of key themes related to the psychological effects of parentification.

**Findings:** The findings reveal that parentification leads to both positive and negative psychological effects. Positively, it fosters emotional maturity, resilience, and independence. Negatively, it imposes an emotional burden, results in social isolation, and poses challenges to academic performance. Importantly, the presence of social support was identified as a crucial factor in mitigating some of the adverse effects of parentification.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that parentification has a profound impact on the psychological well-being of girls in single-parent families, with significant implications for their emotional, social, and academic development. While parentification can promote certain developmental strengths, it also necessitates the need for targeted interventions to support parentified children and mitigate the challenges they face.

**Keywords:** Parentification, Single-parent families, Psychological effects, Emotional maturity, Social isolation, Academic challenges.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of parentification, wherein children assume roles and responsibilities typically associated with those of a parent, has garnered significant scholarly attention, particularly in the context of single-parent families. This phenomenon, often a consequence of family dynamics and socio-economic factors, can have profound psychological effects on children, especially girls (Hassanpour et al., 2023; Nuttall et al., 2021).

Parentification is not a new concept; however, its implications have evolved, particularly as family structures have become more diverse. Biblarz and Stacey (2010) underscore the importance of understanding the role of gender in parenting and its subsequent effects on children. Their research opens the door to exploring how the absence of a gendered parental figure impacts the parentification process. This is particularly relevant in single-parent families, where the child, often a girl, may assume the role left vacant by the absent parent. Such roles can encompass both emotional and instrumental duties, ranging from household management to providing emotional support to the parent and siblings (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010).

The emotional and developmental repercussions of parentification have been extensively documented. Borchet, Lewandowska-Walter, and Rostowska (2018) highlight the challenges parentified children face in completing developmental tasks, suggesting that the premature assumption of adult responsibilities can hinder emotional and social development (Borchet et al., 2018). This aligns with Burton's (2007) conceptual model, which delineates how parentification can emerge as a survival strategy in economically disadvantaged families, often leading to childhood adultification (Burton, 2007).

The psychological burden of parentification has been further explored by Byng-Hall (2002), who emphasizes the need for relieving parentified children's burdens, particularly in families with insecure attachment patterns. This is crucial as the parentification process can exacerbate feelings of stress, anxiety, and isolation among children, potentially impacting their psychological health and development (Byng-Hall, 2002).

Research by Hooper et al. (2012) delves into the buffering effects of parentification, suggesting that while parentification can lead to negative health outcomes, certain family dynamics and coping mechanisms can mitigate its impact (Hooper, Doehler, et al., 2012). Similarly, Hooper, Wallace, Doehler, and Dantzer (2012) explore the

implications of parentification across different ethnic identities, underscoring the intersectionality of family-of-origin and cultural factors in the psychological health of college students (Hooper, Wallace, et al., 2012).

The specific challenges faced by girls in single-parent families undergoing parentification are highlighted by Leung et al. (2023), who examine maternal distress and its effects on adolescent mental health. This study is particularly relevant as it considers the dual role of filial responsibilities as both risks and buffers in the context of single-mother families in poverty (Leung et al., 2023).

Lut et al. (2021) provide a systematic review of the health outcomes and development of children in single-parent households, offering a broader context for understanding the specific challenges and resilience factors associated with parentification (Lut et al., 2021). Similarly, Nuttall et al. (2021) advocate for a nuanced assessment of children's caregiving responses to contextualize the caregiving role within familial conflicts, advancing the assessment of parentification (Nuttall et al., 2021).

The literature also touches on the potential benefits of parentification. Tompkins (2006) explores the beneficial role of parentification in families affected by maternal HIV infection, suggesting that under certain circumstances, parentification can lead to positive outcomes (Tompkins, 2006). Moreover, Walsh et al. (2006) examine the role of parentification and family climate in the adaptation of immigrant adolescents, indicating that parentification can have complex effects on children's development, influenced by broader socio-cultural and familial contexts (Walsh et al., 2006).

Thus, the current study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the psychological effects of parentification on girls within single-parent families. Through qualitative analysis, including semi-structured interviews, this research seeks to illuminate the nuanced experiences of these girls, contributing to a deeper understanding of parentification's impact and informing interventions designed to support parentified children in single-parent families.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the psychological effects of parentification on girls within single-parent families. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of personal experiences, perceptions, and the complex realities of parentification.

This approach enabled the researchers to capture the nuanced psychological impacts on participants, providing rich, detailed insights that quantitative methods may not uncover.

The study targeted a purposive sample of girls aged 13 to 18 years old who have been identified as assuming adult responsibilities in their single-parent households. Participants were recruited through community centers, schools, and social services agencies specializing in family support. The sample size aimed for a diverse representation of socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, and family structures to ensure a broad understanding of parentification experiences.

The study aimed for theoretical saturation, a key concept in qualitative research indicating that no new themes, insights, or theories are emerging from data analysis. This was achieved by continuously analyzing the data concurrently with data collection, allowing for adjustments in the interview guide as new themes emerged. The process continued until additional interviews no longer provided new information, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the psychological effects of parentification on the participants.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and for those under 18, parental consent was also secured. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process, with all identifiable information being removed from the transcripts and any published materials.

## 2.2. Measures

### 2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data was collected exclusively through semi-structured interviews, which were designed to encourage participants to share their experiences, feelings, and perceptions

regarding their roles within their families. The interview guide comprised open-ended questions that allowed for flexibility in responses, enabling participants to elaborate on their personal experiences of parentification. Questions were developed to explore the emotional, social, and academic impacts of their responsibilities in the household. All interviews were conducted in a private, comfortable setting to ensure confidentiality and encourage open, honest communication. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, where the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The research team then carefully read through the transcripts to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to the psychological impact of parentification. This involved coding the data, categorizing codes into themes, and interpreting the findings in the context of existing literature on parentification and its effects on children's psychological well-being.

## 3. Findings and Results

The study comprised 21 female participants, all of whom were actively engaged in parentification roles within their single-parent families. The age distribution of the participants was as follows: six participants were aged 13-14, eight were aged 15-16, and seven were aged 17-18, providing a comprehensive insight into the adolescent experience of parentification across various developmental stages. Socioeconomic status, determined by the parent or guardian's reported income, ranged widely among the participants: seven were from low-income families, nine from middle-income families, and five from upper-middle-income families.

**Table 1**

*The Results of Thematic Analysis*

Categories (Main Themes)	Subcategories (Subthemes)	Concepts (Open Codes)
Emotional Impact	Emotional Maturity	- Early emotional development- Empathy- Emotional labor
	Emotional Burden	- Stress- Anxiety- Feelings of isolation- Guilt
	Coping Mechanisms	- Denial- Emotional suppression- Seeking support
	Identity Formation	- Role confusion- Self-sacrifice- Independence
	Resilience	- Adaptability- Optimism- Overcoming adversity
Social Impact	Social Isolation	- Peer detachment- Limited social activities
	Role in Family Dynamics	- Caregiver role- Parent-child role reversal- Mediator
	Social Support	- Community resources- Extended family- Social services

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Academic and Career Impact	Academic Performance	- School attendance- Homework completion- Academic stress
	Future Career Aspirations	- Career ambitions- Influence of family responsibilities- Professional support seeking
	Balancing Responsibilities	- Time management- Prioritization- Sacrifice of personal time
Personal Development	Independence and Autonomy	- Decision-making skills- Financial management- Personal responsibility
	Interpersonal Relationships	- Trust issues- Building healthy relationships- Communication skills
	Self-Esteem and Self-Worth	- Self-perception- Confidence- Self-doubt
	Personal Goals and Aspirations	- Personal ambitions- Overcoming familial constraints- Personal growth and fulfillment

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In exploring the psychological effects of parentification in girls within single-parent families, this qualitative study identified four main themes with varying subthemes, each encompassing distinct concepts derived from the data. The findings, enriched by direct quotations from the participants, provide profound insights into the multifaceted impacts of parentification.

### 3.1. Emotional Impact

Emotional Maturity emerged as a significant subtheme, characterized by early emotional development, empathy, and emotional labor. Participants often articulated feelings beyond their years, with one stating, "I've had to grow up faster, understand emotions like an adult."

Emotional Burden was frequently discussed, encompassing stress, anxiety, feelings of isolation, and guilt. "It's like carrying a weight," one girl described, "constantly worrying about things my friends don't even think about."

Coping Mechanisms varied among participants, including denial, emotional suppression, and seeking support. "Sometimes, I just pretend everything's fine," said another, highlighting the complexity of their emotional responses.

Identity Formation and Resilience were also noted, with girls discussing role confusion, self-sacrifice, adaptability, and overcoming adversity. "I've learned to be strong because I had no other choice," a participant reflected.

### 3.2. Social Impact

Under Social Isolation, girls reported peer detachment and limited social activities. "I don't have much time for friends," one explained, indicating the sacrifices made.

Role in Family Dynamics highlighted the caregiver role, parent-child role reversal, and being a mediator in family conflicts. "I'm more of a mom than a daughter," a girl shared, illustrating the blurred lines in family roles.

Social Support from community resources, extended family, and social services was crucial for some. "My aunt has been a huge support," mentioned a participant, underscoring the importance of external support networks.

### 3.3. Academic and Career Impact

Academic Performance concerns included school attendance, homework completion, and academic stress. "Juggling school and home is overwhelming," a participant noted, depicting the challenge of balancing responsibilities.

Future Career Aspirations and Balancing Responsibilities were themes, with girls expressing ambitions and discussing time management, prioritization, and the sacrifice of personal time. "I dream of becoming a doctor, but it feels so far away," one girl lamented, highlighting the impact on future aspirations.

### 3.4. Personal Development

Independence and Autonomy, Interpersonal Relationships, Self-Esteem and Self-Worth, and Personal Goals and Aspirations were critical themes. Girls spoke of developing decision-making skills, building healthy relationships, navigating trust issues, and pursuing personal growth despite familial constraints. "I've learned to rely on myself," one stated, affirming the journey towards autonomy and self-discovery.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the psychological effects of parentification on girls within single-parent families, revealing significant insights into their emotional, social, academic, and personal developmental landscapes. The findings indicate that parentification leads to increased emotional maturity and burden, characterized by advanced empathy and significant stress and anxiety. Socially, these girls experience isolation due to their caregiving responsibilities, although the importance of social support as a mitigating factor is also highlighted. Academically, the struggle to balance schoolwork with home duties poses a significant challenge, affecting their performance and future aspirations. Despite these challenges, parentification also fosters personal development, promoting independence, resilience, and self-reliance.

Our study highlighted emotional maturity as a significant outcome of parentification, where participants demonstrated advanced empathy and emotional labor capabilities. This is consistent with the findings of Burton (2007), who suggested that parentified children often develop emotional and social skills earlier than their peers (Burton, 2007). However, alongside maturity, an emotional burden was evident, characterized by stress, anxiety, and feelings of isolation, echoing Byng-Hall's (2002) observations on the psychological load borne by parentified children (Byng-Hall, 2002). This duality of maturity and burden illustrates the complex emotional landscape navigated by these girls, underscoring the need for supportive interventions to mitigate negative outcomes.

The theme of social isolation emerged prominently, with participants experiencing peer detachment due to their responsibilities. This isolation reflects Walsh et al.'s (2006) findings, which highlighted the impact of family obligations on the social lives of immigrant adolescents, suggesting that parentification can lead to social sacrifices across diverse contexts (Walsh et al., 2006). Conversely, the importance of social support, as noted in our study, aligns with Hooper et al. (2012), who emphasized the buffering effects of social and family support in mitigating the adverse effects of parentification (Hooper, Doehler, et al., 2012; Hooper, Wallace, et al., 2012).

Participants reported significant academic challenges, including balancing schoolwork with home responsibilities. This theme is supported by Lut et al. (2021), who outlined the potential for academic struggles in children from single-parent families, suggesting that the added burden of parentification could exacerbate these challenges (Lut et al., 2021). Furthermore, the aspiration towards future careers, despite current struggles, mirrors Borchet, Lewandowska-Walter, and Rostowska's (2018) insights into the impact of childhood parentification on emerging adults' developmental tasks, highlighting the long-term influence of parentification on personal and professional aspirations (Borchet et al., 2018).

The findings related to personal development, including increased independence and autonomy, resonate with Nuttall et al. (2021), who emphasized the need to contextualize caregiving within familial relationships (Nuttall et al., 2021). Our study extends this perspective by illustrating how parentification can foster resilience and self-reliance, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the potential benefits amidst the challenges.

The dual nature of parentification's impact, encompassing both positive aspects (such as emotional maturity and resilience) and challenges (such as emotional burden and social isolation), underscores the complexity of the phenomenon. It suggests that while parentification can promote certain developmental advances, it may also necessitate targeted support to address the accompanying emotional and social costs. This nuanced view supports Tompkins' (2006) assertion that parentification can have a beneficial role under specific conditions, emphasizing the importance of contextual factors in determining its outcomes (Tompkins, 2006).

In conclusion, our study contributes to the broader discourse on parentification, highlighting the need for a balanced understanding of its effects. By integrating the perspectives of Biblarz and Stacey (2010) and Hooper, Wallace, Doehler, and Dantzer (2012), our findings emphasize the significance of considering gender, cultural, and familial dynamics in assessing the impact of parentification (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Hooper, Wallace, et al., 2012). The findings advocate for interventions that not only support parentified children in managing their responsibilities but also leverage the skills and resilience they develop through this experience.

## 5. Limitations and Suggestions

The study is limited by its qualitative nature and the relatively small sample size, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the focus on girls within single-parent families limits insights into the experiences of boys or children in different family structures. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces the potential for bias in participants' reflections on their experiences.

Future research should aim to include a more diverse participant pool to explore the experiences of parentification across different genders, family structures, and cultural backgrounds. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of parentification on psychological and social development. Investigating the role of external support systems and their effectiveness in mitigating the negative outcomes associated with parentification would also be beneficial.

The findings highlight the importance of developing targeted interventions to support parentified children. Educational and mental health professionals should be aware of the signs of parentification and its potential impact on

children's emotional and academic well-being. Schools could implement support programs aimed at balancing academic demands with home responsibilities, while mental health services could offer counseling tailored to the unique needs of parentified children. Engaging community resources to provide social support and relief for these families could also alleviate the burdens faced by parentified children, promoting a more balanced development.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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