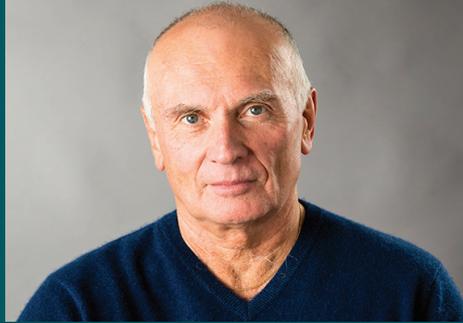


Parentification

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



“I was forced to grow up too soon. This is for any of you out there who are victims of “parentification”. Those of you who had to “be the parent” instead of having a parent. The ones who had to take on more responsibility than you should ever have to at such a young age. Whose childhood was unfairly stolen from them”.

- Jessica Evans

Parentification of children happens when parents are either unwilling and/or unable to effectively parent their children. Parental absence may occur because of mental illness, addiction, arrested development, medical issues, or unavailability due to work or travel. Parentified children step into the parental void. The attempt to take on parental responsibilities snatches children out of childhood, disengaging from a normal developmental process. Let’s look at three expressions of Parentification.

Not Enough Parenting

This form of Parentification is due to parental neglect. The children take on the responsibility of parenting themselves. In lieu of parental guidelines and expectations, children rely upon their own understanding of self-care and social acuity. Children may be challenged to eat properly, rest, attend to personal hygiene and perform academically. Often, parentified kids will take their cues from peers who are being parented effectively.

Parentified children who are neglected are not receiving valuable information about boundaries. They won’t be clear about when a boundary serves their unique preferences and needs, or what kind of boundary is appropriate regarding providing safety. Not being the recipient of nurturance will leave them puzzled about the renewing power of nurturance and what it means to have needs and receive support from others. There will also be uncertainty about the power of receiving encouragement, knowing that someone holds the faith in whom they are. Lastly, they can be baffled about providing adequate limits that delay immediate gratification in the name of securing some valued future outcome.

There can be a level of severe confusion about the price paid for being neglected. The confusion is amplified if children ignore the fact that they are neglected and focus on the freedom afforded them by their parents’ lack of responsibility. The most prevalent coping mechanism aimed at dealing with these losses is increased levels of pretending. They run a high risk of pretending they need no one and that they know exactly what they’re doing.

Sometimes, parentified children will create romantic liaisons with their teenage peers. These adolescent connections are attempts to anesthetize feelings of abandonment and inadequacy. The child waffles between extreme dependency in an effort to feel loved and wanted, to indulging in a compulsive self-reliance. In either case, children are attempting

to prove they know how to have real relationships or demonstrate that they need no one. Both causes them to suffer from a deep level of pretending.

Unless parentified children who suffered from neglect seek out therapeutic help, early coping mechanisms get amplified in later years. The one area where feelings of inadequacy push to the surface and pretending begins to run thin is in relationships. In the absence of early parental involvement, parentified children have limited self-care skills and an underdeveloped aptitude for rapport building. Several strategies are often employed to cope with feeling relationally deficient. One such strategy is simply deciding that relationships are basically frivolous and a waste of time. “Why get into fraternizing when there is so much to get accomplished”.

The second strategy, which rolls easily off the first one, is to develop a strong task orientation toward life. The vulnerability of not knowing what to do in relationships is replaced by protocols, formulas and plans for getting stuff done. The third strategy is to ramp up a need for control, which is an attempt at keeping old feelings of helplessness at bay. This controlling energy can drive a compulsive striving to get things right. This striving energy is meant to numb the ever-present feeling of not being enough. Let’s look at a second level of parentification, which carries more responsibilities.

Functional Parentification

There is another level of responsibility often delegated to parentified children as the result of not enough parenting. Besides taking care of themselves, they can be asked or required to attend to fundamental domestic tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, shopping for groceries and even paying bills. This level of parentification may also include the care of younger siblings. Parentified children take on the responsibility of helping with homework, assisting in getting ready for school, and preparing meals. This dimension of parentification asks children to not only pretend that they can take care of themselves but also to pretend they know how to take care of other children.

Too Much Parent and Not Enough

When children don’t get enough parent, neglected by

parents, they may also get too much parent, which translates into abuse. The parent’s emotional needs take precedent over those of the child. When this happens, children receive a greater call out of childhood. Now, they not only need to take care of themselves but also care for their parent. They are strapped with confusion about how to take care of themselves as well as how to care for the adult. The child moves into the role of friend, confidant, surrogate parent, or surrogate spouse. This form of parentification is often referred to as emotional incest and is typically accompanied by deep feelings of inadequacy, which can haunt well into adulthood. There is a higher likelihood of emotional incest in single-parent homes.

Parentified children often suffer from a gnawing, amorphous sense of low self-esteem, never quite feeling they are enough. As adults, they may avoid relationships either because they are convinced that they are unlovable, or because they believe the past will be reproduced, where they are consumed by the other person. The latter fear being the result of the child’s emotional boundaries having been violated. They may see a relationship happening only if they are able to give enough.

Victims of emotional incest either avoid relationships or become caregivers. Caregiving affords them the opportunity to be in a relationship without fully participating. They reproduce the early neglect of their emotional needs by only focusing on the other person. If partners and spouses continue to inform them about their needs, they can continue to deliver, avoiding the inherent ambiguity of real intimacy and the typical conflict of diverse needs.

Abused parentified children come from a void of genuine adult responsibility. These children learned early how to become overly responsible as they attempted to off-balance the under-responsibility of the parent. Hence, they are prone to believing they are responsible for the happiness of others. They can easily chastise themselves for the troubled feelings of friends and family. This over-responsible inclination is accompanied by weak or excessively permeable boundaries, leaving them confused about where they begin and where they end.

Both neglected and abused parentified children often carry a feeling of being fraudulent into adulthood.

When a childhood pattern of pretending is assimilated into the psyche, it can be difficult to discern what one is truly capable of.

The Healing of Parentification

- **The Real Story.** Parentified children need help as adults to examine the actual story of their childhoods. They need support to clarify the level of neglect and/or abuse that took place. There is likely going to be a level of denial of how much their parents abdicated their responsibility to actually parent. Moving through such denial needs to be a gradual process, gently honoring the distorted view held by the adult who was parentified.
- **Right-sizing Self-Concept.** This inventory should include downsizing the idealization of self-reliance, exploring its benefits as well as its capacity to generate emotional isolation. A review of how much they were asked to operate out of their competency level is an important way to further an honest account. Such an account should include forgiving themselves for pretending as a way to cope with a very challenging situation.
- **Grief.** There will be a need to find permission to feel the losses of an un-lived childhood, losses such as parental guidance and significant attachment and the loss of time for play. There is also the loss of trusting that they could embark upon adventures with peers and return to the security of a home held together by a real parent. Also, they lost the freedom that comes with the trust that someone more knowledgeable and mature is primarily responsible to provide them with care.
- **Somatic Work.** They very well may need some somatic work to regulate the nervous system as they continue to come into the reality of their pasts. It can also be helpful to relieve the need to detach from the here and now by engaging in dissociation. This kind of work will generate more resiliency to overcome feeling out of control as they access varied emotions. The vulnerability regarding feeling emotions is due to the understanding that they would likely be left alone when accessing deep feelings.
- **Develop an Inner Parent.** As adults, parentified children run the risk of reproducing the past by neglecting themselves. The neglect may show up regarding dental care, regular medical checkups, excessive work habits, confusion about personal limits and not knowing how to ask for help. This inner parent knows who to ask for help, allows for good boundaries by saying “no” and “yes” authentically. This inner parent identifies and provides activities that are nurturing, such as a walk in the woods, a sauna experience, therapeutic massage, a nap and simply calling a friend. It is extremely healing to take on the responsibility of being self-encouraging, interrupting self-ridicule and self-blame.
- **Developing a Reliable Support System.** This is a critical element in the healing of parentification. They learned early that there are no reliable support systems. Hence, they face the fact that someone or some group offers more than their parents, which from a child’s perspective, is a betrayal of the parent. The therapeutic agenda will be to find the courage to prioritize self-loyalty in place of parental loyalty. They will need to develop a discerning trust for others, which translates into identifying who will tell them the truth and treat them kindly.
- **Learning to Fully Participate in a Relationship.** Full participation calls for interrupting compulsive caretaking and replacing it with one’s own desire and learning to negotiate and compromise from that desire. It also means learning to identify and employ effective boundaries. The starting point being willing to say “no” and “yes” authentically. These learnings will entail feeling vulnerable as the template provided by caretaking falls away, calling for resiliency to bear the unfavorable responses of those receiving your boundaries.
- **Cope with the ensuing ambiguity.** Due to the lack of parental guidance, parentification can lead to

a kind of literalism of life's deepest mysteries. Overly concrete answers and solutions are formulated to address ephemeral issues such as freedom, loyalty, spirituality, and love. There can be a tendency toward self-righteousness to cope with the shame of not knowing. Parentified children will be served by growing a resilient holding regarding uncertainty as well as sustaining curiosity rather than remaining smug in the face of ambiguity.

Quite often, adult parentified children have carved some niche where they feel confident and secure. It may be a professional arena or a hobby. They know that in a safe place they don't have to worry about being confused, pretending to know or needing help. However, their relational lives, which cannot be reduced to a simple set of regulations, will likely be where they face the greatest opportunity to welcome some healing. It will mean finding the courage to call off their moratorium on noticing they need help and acquiring it. Lastly, upon being self-examining, adults who were parentified as children need to see themselves on a continuum, reflecting a degree of parentification.

Parentification is all very familiar to me. I was a parentified child. My early understanding of it happened during a medical visit for my father who was being treated for poor circulation. I was sixteen at the time. When the physician came out to speak to my mother about my father's condition, she stepped back several paces leaving me in the path of receiving the doctor's message. It would be some years before I would become more curious about where I came from. Although my adolescents was reflective of athletic and academic success, the striving instilled in me by both the role of hero and parentified, left me feeling an unquenchable inadequacy.

It wasn't until I was 29 did I succumb to a deep need to get help. It was likely the death of one daughter, and another completely disabled that brought me to an undeniable sense of defeat. Sense I had been groomed to pretend that I knew what I was doing, I was engulfed in shame as there was simply no more

room for pretense. I learned that my mother likely felt quite frightened about being a parent, fearing some level of failure as well as bearing the scars of paternal neglect. The stage was set for calling an oldest son into the role of attempting to parent his mother. A task doomed to failure.

I recall my therapist asking me to bring some pictures of childhood to our next session. I showed her a picture of me when I was twelve. She asked me what I noticed about the picture. I responded by suggesting I simply saw a twelve-year-old kid. The therapist pointed out that she saw a twelve-year-old boy who looked seventeen. I looked back at the picture only to confirm her perceptions. When I showed her a picture of me at seventeen, she responded, "He looks like a contemporary of yours at 29".

I was immediately curious about how did I come to look older than I was. I will always remember her words.

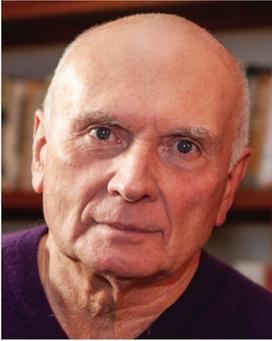
"The psyche holds a powerful energy. When you were convinced that you should be older than you were, your psyche likely enrolled your body to help play the role of being older. You emotionally responded to the family's need for you to exit childhood, so you did, in mind and body. Now it's time to return. It's not too late for you to reclaim the childhood that was always yours", explained Joyce, her compassion and encouragement being palpable, as she leaned forward, clearly convinced that the task of reclaiming my childhood was certainly attainable.

"How do I begin"? I puzzled, with the photographs swirling in my brain.

"You've already begun. You hear seeking help, admitting that there might be someone larger than you who can assist and guide you", Joyce explained, her words landing on me as a trustworthy reassurance.

I'm not sure if I'll ever completely reclaim my lost childhood. However, I did get incremental help along the way. I recall my old professor Ken Blanchard saying, "I never make major decisions alone", which went a long way to interrupt my compulsive self-reliance. I feel considerably less urgent when facing the unknown. I stay as close as possible to the mantra, "More will be revealed", and typically it is.

PARENTIFICATION



PAUL DUNION, Mobius Transformational Faculty, Senior Expert, and track leader at the Next Practice Institute, earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at the University of Connecticut and Three Rivers Community College.

He has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. As a holistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma, Paul is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Paul represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, he created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Paul established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. He has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, Paul offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

Paul has published six books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home* (2016); *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be* (2016); *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind* (2013); *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy* (2006); *Temptation in the House of the Lord* (2004); and his latest offering *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate* (2021).



MOBIUS[™]
EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

©PAUL DUNION