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HRI E-BOOK:

Setting Family Boundaries & Avoiding Parentification



This E-Book was designed by Bringing Out the Best at UNC Greensboro utilizing resources developed by the Healthy Relationships Initiative.



What is parentification and how does it affect families?



Parentification occurs when one child takes on a parenting role to take care of another sibling, or in some cases, a parent. This may look like making lunches or cooking dinner for the family, cleaning the home, paying the bills, or dressing and/or caring for younger siblings. While some of these tasks may look like chores normally assigned to a child to teach responsibility, parentification is much different.

Parentification places adult responsibilities, such as the role of caretaker, onto a child, and the child usually fills this role to try and maintain functioning within the family. However, these responsibilities don't always look like chores or physical caretaking. In some cases, a parentified child may become a parent's main emotional support, listening to their challenges and giving them comfort or advice. This level of responsibility often also carries a large amount of pressure, leading to feelings of stress, anxiety, and isolation.



There are many different situations that may lead to the parentification of a child within a family. Some examples include: when one parent passes away, when there is substance abuse within the home, or when parents have to work long hours to support the family.

When big transitions, changes, or life challenges, such as the above examples, occur, family members often adjust their roles to accommodate these changes/challenges and maintain a certain level of functioning within the family.

It's important to recognize that many times, when parentification takes place within a family, it is a response to stressors or challenging life events, and family members are often trying their best to survive and maintain family functioning.

Parentification can lead to adverse outcomes for children and cause strained relationships within the family. It can place stress on both the parent-child and sibling relationships within the family, becoming a barrier to deeper connection. Many times these children are not able to fully experience their childhood because of the adult role they take on at an early age. The child experiencing parentification may feel isolated from their sibling(s) or other children their age because they are not able to engage in the same activities or interests due to their increased responsibilities within the family. They may also feel resentful toward their parent(s) later in life for expecting them to take care of adult responsibilities as a child.



Not only can parentification pose challenges within the family, but it can also lead to mistrust of others and difficulty building healthy relationships outside of the family. Children who have experienced parentification may not have been able to rely on their parents or guardians to take care of them, and instead, they were relied on by others. Because of this experience, when these children grow up, they often feel like they cannot rely on others, as they have only been able to rely on themselves up until this point. This can create challenges in future relationships and lead to similar patterns where the individual who was parentified as a child partners with someone who is dependent on them within the relationship.



Parents can prevent parentification from occurring by increasing their awareness about the topic of parentification, as well as recognizing appropriate roles for each member of the family. When facing life events that prompt changes or challenges the family must adjust to, it's important for parents to try their best to maintain boundaries between the parent-child roles within the family. **On the next page, we'll include tips for parents to avoid potential parentification of their children.**

Give your child age appropriate responsibilities. Allowing your kids to help with chores around the home is a great way to teach them responsibility; however, be sure to avoid giving them too many tasks or tasks that are meant for the adults in the home. Some examples of age appropriate responsibilities for younger children may include helping you cook dinner, cleaning their room, making their bed, or feeding the pets. As children get older these responsibilities can change to be more developmentally appropriate for pre-teens or teenagers, such as babysitting a younger sibling, helping a parent cook dinner, or doing the dishes.

Maintain the hierarchy within the family. This means taking charge of responsibilities such as finances, caretaking, and making family decisions. As the parent/guardian, it's important to try your best to establish a sense of safety and security, especially during times of uncertainty or transition. However, this doesn't mean that you shouldn't seek help or support during challenging times. There are often circumstances that are out of our control and create barriers to security and stability within the family. When these challenges occur, recognize that it's okay to reach out for help from family members, friends, or community supports.

Establish and maintain healthy boundaries. Creating healthy boundaries with your kids is a key aspect of preventing parentification. Healthy boundaries may include being mindful of what and/or how much you share with your children. Try your best to refrain from leaning on your child as an emotional support during challenging times, as this can create a high levels of stress and pressure for your child. This may look like refraining from discussing certain topics that may lead to your child becoming an emotional support in a way that isn't healthy for the parent-child relationship. For example, during a separation or divorce, it's important for parents to avoid talking about the other parent in a negative way, as this can damage the child's relationship with that parent.

This information will help you develop awareness surrounding the topic of parentification and will help you navigate challenging situations and boundaries with your kids in the future!