

The positive and negative aspects of parentification: An integrated review

Ruziana Masiran^{a,b,*}, Normala Ibrahim^{a,b}, Hamidin Awang^c, Poh Ying Lim^d

^a Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

^b Department of Psychiatry, Hospital Pengajar Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

^c Psychiatry Unit, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

^d Department of Community Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The literature suggests that some children at increased risk of parentification, which includes children of chronically ill or substance-misusing parents and children of divorced or migrant parents. Despite the necessity for some children to assume adult roles, parentification is potentially harmful. This paper aims to: (i) investigate the parentification concept and outcomes and (ii) summarize the components that render parentification adaptive in children. Articles were retrieved from Scopus, PubMed, Dimensions AI, Google Scholar, and reference list tracking using the keywords “parentification” and “parentification AND children”. A critical review was performed with a narrative approach to synthesize the 61 included studies to determine the existing knowledge and identify research priorities within the field of parentification. The findings were reported based on the Literature Review Synthesis Process and the Scale for the Assessment of Narrative Review Articles (SANRA). The experience of parentification could be adaptive and empowering for children. The potential components of adaptive parentification included emotional support, supportive and positive relationships with siblings and grandparents, parents openly delegating the roles to each child, having age-appropriate roles, parental support and validation, and children’s positive appraisal and perception of the role-taking.

1. Introduction

Parents are expected to fulfil their children’s basic physical and psychological needs (Goldthorpe et al., 2019; Gutman & Feinstein, 2010; Maccoby, 2000). Nevertheless, not all parents have the resources and ability to do so constantly. Occasionally, parents are obliged or choose to allow their children to assume the adult or parental role in the family. This parent–child role reversal is more commonly known as parentification (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973), but is also referred to as “spousification” (Schleider & Weisz, 2017) or childhood “adultification” (Burton, 2007). In line with Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973), who stated that parentification occurs when the boundaries within family subsystems are absent, Nuttall et al. (2019) emphasized the breakdown in parent–child roles, where both led to children assuming obligations typically reserved for adults. A parent abdicates their parental responsibilities towards the parentified child or the child’s siblings and in return the parentified child performs caretaking behaviors for or towards the parent. In “role reversal parentification” (Kerig, 2005), role-taking can be either uni- or bidirectional. The mechanisms

and impact of parentification may also vary in different cultures (Rana & Das (2021). For example, adult role-taking may have appears to be a part of the cultural norms in regions such as Southeast Asia, where children hold filial responsibility (Hwang, 1999; Yeung et al., 2018). Furthermore, Asian parents usually delegate child-care functions to older siblings due to a large number of children in many families (Md-Yunus, 2005).

In specific places or situations, social, economic, or psychological issues may cause children to assume adult roles. During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID)-19 pandemic, quarantine and lockdown measures contributed to increased parenting stress (Chung et al., 2020), psychological distress among family members (Luttik et al., 2020), and divorce rates (Goldberg et al., 2021). Moreover, mothers worldwide were burdened with role conflict and work–life imbalance (Adisa et al., 2021; Hosna et al., 2020; Kansal, 2020). Additionally, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) highlighted its concerns regarding childcare challenges during the pandemic. It is acknowledged that the combined school closures and work restrictions presented parents with the challenge of balancing work, house chores, childcare, and their children’s

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.
E-mail addresses: ruziana_m@upm.edu.my (R. Masiran), normala_ib@upm.edu.my (N. Ibrahim), hamidin@usim.edu.my (H. Awang), pohying_my@upm.edu.my (P.Y. Lim).

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scholastic supervision (Gromada et al., 2020). Consequently, children began assuming adults' roles. Berkman (2008) and Cauchemez et al. (2009) discuss the negative consequences of children caring for themselves due to pandemic-related school closures following the 2009–2010 H1N1 influenza pandemic and 2003–2004 H5N1 pandemic threat. Children's self-care in this situation is associated with behavioral and social problems (Berkman, 2008). Cauchemez (2009) further discusses the socioeconomic impact of school closure as a consequence of parents being absent from work to care for their children at home. Perkins et al. (2021) hypothesized about sibling violence risk following the lack of parental supervision during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these discussions on the undesirable effects of parentification, a study on Filipino children during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that the children could balance performing domestic roles and maintaining positive parent–child relationships as they recognized their potential in becoming self-reliant (Teng et al., 2021).

Psychological boundaries, specifically those between children and their parents, define appropriate family roles and demarcate developmental differences and are therefore crucial for maintaining healthy child development (Johnson & Ray, 2016). Parentification may result in the dissolution of psychological boundaries within the family system (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). Consequently, poor or lost boundaries (boundary dissolution or boundary diffusion) may interfere with a child's capacity to progress through development (Kerig, 2005) and have been linked with child psychopathology. Parentification affects the individuation process required in a child developing a sense of self (Earley & Cushway, 2002) and adult parent–child relationships (Buhl, 2008). This is a part of the separation–individuation phase described by Mahler (1971) that marks a life transition during which a child gradually differentiates from a caregiver and eventually develops their own characteristics.

The principle of individuation supports the pivotal dimensions of child connectedness with their parents and child independence from parental authority. This possibly explains the view of Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973), who considered parentification a regressive process in parent–child relationships, during which parentified children missed valuable parts of their childhood. Furthermore, the excessive burden placed on children may hinder their emotional and cognitive age-appropriate development and restrict their capacity for play and socialization (Byng-Hall, 2008). Based on the parentification-pseudomaturity theory (Newcomb, 1996), children inadvertently bypass normal childhood experiences when they adopt adult roles and may not be able to fulfill some developmental tasks, such as separation from the family system (Borchet et al., 2018). Thus, such children would struggle to acquire the skills needed to become adults and might experience undesirable future consequences, such as caretaker syndrome (Valleau et al., 1995) and the intergenerational effects of parentification (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Wasilewska, 2012).

Past parentification reviews have enhanced theoretical understanding of role reversal in families (Nuttall & Valentino, 2017; Peris & Emery, 2014), the influence on identity and relationships (Earley & Cushway, 2002), the need for parentification assessment among high-risk individuals (DiCaccavo, 2006), and consequence diversity (Borchet et al., 2018). Some of these reviews highlighted boundary dissolution and disturbed separation–individuation as the underlying psychological mechanisms behind parentification, while others focused on the negative effects of parentification. Interestingly, the authors of one review encouraged researchers to identify adaptive and maladaptive factors in parentification (Earley & Cushway, 2002). Rana and Das (2021) described parentification as a spectrum that ranges from a destructive end to no parentification and adaptive parentification, with non-parentified children assuming developmentally necessary responsibilities that do not exceed their means. Despite such reviews, literature that contextualizes parentification in global socioeconomic and health crises is lacking. Nevertheless, many positive aspects of parentification are hypothesized as being specifically relevant in such

situations. Hence, there is a relevant need to understand the concept and effect of parentification and consequently provide the best guide to de-pathologize its negative short- and long-term implications.

While a grasp of parentification outcomes is valuable in the parenting field, an understanding of the means of optimizing these outcomes is pertinent to improving parentified children's current and future mental health. Examination of the various parentification aspects is expected to yield information to guide the development of a psychosocial intervention for families experiencing parentification. In this paper, a narrative review scope is followed by discussing three parentification constructs in improving the experience of adult role-taking in children: the concept, positive outcomes, and negative outcomes. An integrated framework was constructed in which multiple parentification constructs were synthesized, where articles that contained relevant information on the constructs were emphasized.

2. Methods

The basic review materials based on the identified articles on selected topics under parentification were developed using the Literature Review Synthesis Process (Ibrahim & Mustafa Kamal, 2018). Topics were identified based on the “who”, “what”, and “how” constructs in formulating the main research question (Ibrahim, 2008, 2011). “Who” was the element or subject being impacted by the issue that was being researched, “what” construct was the body of knowledge being used to address a research inquiry, and “how” was the action to be taken on the “who” during the study. This narrative literature review included scientific topics related to parentification experienced by children. Studies on parentification aspects were reviewed to enable critical assessment and summarization of the influence of parentification and means of improving its outcomes in children.

Articles were identified using Scopus, Dimensions AI, PubMed, Google Scholar, and reference list tracking. The terms “parentification” or “parentification AND children” were searched from the titles, abstracts, and keywords of peer-reviewed journal articles published in English. Separate searches performed between 23 September and 16 October 2020 returned a total of 335 articles, of which 238 were screened using the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1). A total of 177 articles were excluded, leaving the final 61 articles (Fig. 1).

Prior key works and how they could be improved to support future studies were analyzed. This procedure was repeated until constructs were identified based on article similarities and a synthesized summary for each theme could be produced. The results were categorized into three constructs: (i) parentification concept, (ii) positive parentification outcomes, and (iii) negative parentification outcomes. The information was integrated to form a unique interpretation based on the constructs. Finally, conclusions were derived regarding potential suggestions to improve the outcomes of parentification in children. Reporting was guided by the Scale for the Assessment of Narrative Review Articles (SANRA) (Baethge et al., 2019). The review elaborated on the parentification concepts and its positive and negative outcomes based on thematic analysis.

Table 1
Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Aspect	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Literature type	Primary quantitative and qualitative study or literature Peer-reviewed article	Review article Meta-analysis Conference proceeding Dissertation or thesis Non-English
Language	English	Non-English
Time	Inception to 2020	–

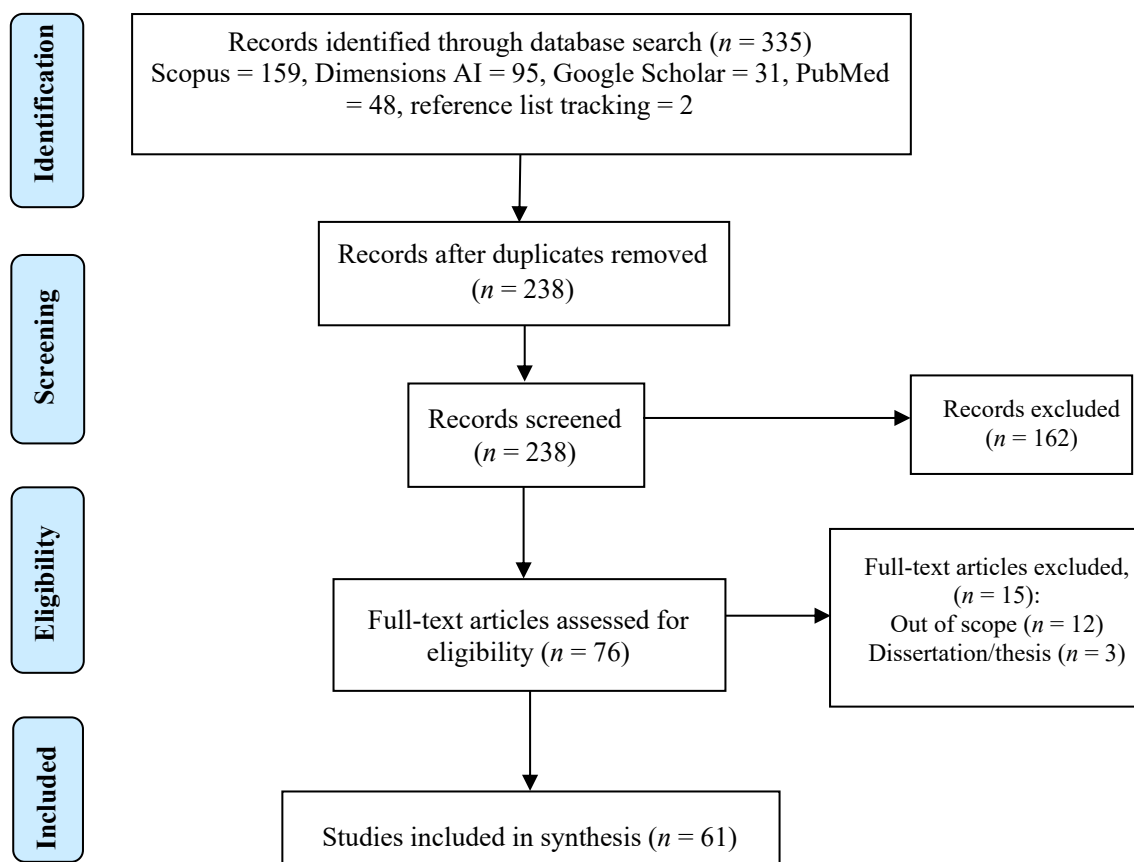


Fig. 1. The preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) (Moher et al., 2009) flow diagram of the article selection process.

3. Results

3.1. Parentification concept

Definition of parentification. Parentification occurs when children are assigned excessive instrumental or emotional caregiving roles (Nuttall et al., 2019). Contrastingly, infantilization occurs when parents assign too few responsibilities to children. Chen and Panebianco (2019) reported that instrumental and emotional parentification were highly correlated ($r = 0.56, p < 0.001$) among adolescents. The two forms of parentification referred to different children's responsibilities. Instrumental parentification is a subtle expression of parentification (Van Parys & Rober, 2013) that involves the responsibilities in the physical family maintenance, such as cooking, laundry, preparing younger siblings for classes, or caring for a sick parent. Such parentification is performed either independently or supervised by adults or other children.

Typically, mothers perform emotional parentification (Hetherington, 1999) where a child nurtures family members. This was observed among families affected by domestic violence where parentified children were frequently required to care for their siblings and other family members (Callaghan et al., 2016). Emotional parentification is categorized as problem-solving, parent-focused, and sibling-focused (Nuttall et al., 2018; Shin & Hecht, 2013). As part of the emotional role reversal, a parentified child's advice might even be sought to solve family problems (Shin & Hecht, 2013). While parent-focused parentification directs caregiving towards the parents, child-focused parentification directs caregiving towards siblings (Tomeny et al., 2017). Identifying the type of parentification facilitates understanding of their different effects on children (Hooper & Wallace, 2010).

Parentification meaning and experience have expanded from their core classifications in the past decade. For example, although the adult

or parental roles are commonly delegated to children, grandparents were also parentified among single-mother families (Napora, 2016). Like fathers, grandparents may provide emotional and material support to children and their mothers. Children may also be the active rather than passive recipients of adult roles. In a qualitative study on parentification experiences among children whose parents were hospitalized due to depression, Van Parys and Rober (2013) reported that some children look forward to these caretaking roles to gain a sense of contribution and recognition.

Parentification level is also related to the child's resilience (Godsall et al., 2004). In their effort to comprehend the parentification experience, Athamneh and Benjamin (2019) suggested that parentification is an alternative to education for girls to gain self-worth. Despite this, the difference in the parentification experience between boys and girls is not well understood. Earlier studies seemed to support the idea that parentified boys are more psychologically affected. For example, the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce found that a high levels of paternal emotional parentification during childhood was associated with depression among young adult sons (Hetherington, 1999). Similarly, Hetherington (1999) indicated that high parentification levels (both instrumental and emotional) were associated with internalizing behavior problem more in girls than boys. Nonetheless, Koerner et al. (2004) did not observe the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between emotional parentification and psychosocial adjustment in children.

Parentification risk factors. Parentification may begin with socio-demographic factors. Błażek (2018) examined birth order and identified a connection between pathological parental functioning and the parentification of the first child. While it is possible that older children (Hetherington, 1999; Żarczyńska-Hyla et al., 2019) would perform adult roles better, younger children are more parentified (Wang et al., 2017). As mentioned, cultural practices may influence role-taking among

children and leads to different observation among different ethnic or cultural groups. For instance, Hooper et al. (2015) found that male Black Americans or Latino/Latina Americans were more parentified than female and White. Another study among Chinese boys shows a higher parentification due to the greater responsibility and the patriarchal nature of traditional Chinese society (Wang et al., 2017).

Moreover, boys from divorced families experienced more emotional parentification than boys from non-divorced families (Hetherington, 1999). Compared to Wang et al. (2017), others reported that girls were more frequently parentified (Burnett et al., 2006; Harrison & Albanese, 2012; Maysless et al., 2004; Źarczyńska-Hyla et al., 2019). Maternal parentification (where mothers delegate the adult roles to children) was associated with parental divorce, neglect, and rejection (Maysless et al., 2004). Correspondingly, maternal parentification was identified as the most common type of boundary diffusion in divorced families (Perrin et al., 2013). Maysless et al. (2004) demonstrated higher parentification among girls, with stronger maternal parentification than paternal parentification.

Źarczyńska-Hyla et al. (2019) reported that the strongest correlates of parentification included parental conflict, parental alcoholism, divorce, single-parent household, and a step-parent's presence. Parental conflict intensity and coping strategies apparently influenced parentification characteristics (Borchet & Lewandowska-Walter, 2017). Moreover, girls experience a conflict-dependent effect. Hetherington (1999) demonstrated that emotional parentification levels were highest among girls from high-conflict divorced families, followed by those from high-conflict non-divorced families. Comparatively, the author reported that girls from low-conflict families had lower emotional parentification levels regardless of divorce.

Parentification within families with alcoholic parents is also widely established. Children of parents who abused alcohol reported more parentification as adults (Kelley et al., 2007). Supporting this finding, Burnett et al. (2006) demonstrated that family unpredictability and parental alcoholism contributed to parentification independently. Parental divorce might directly contribute to problematic parentification in the affected children that might persist into adulthood (Jurkovic et al., 2001). Following a divorce, children may become their parents' advocates, which creates an unhealthy setting for their psychosocial development (Goldman & Coane, 1977). Furthermore, Perrin et al. (2013) reported that boundary diffusion was common among young adults with divorced parents as compared to those with non-divorced parents. In post-divorce family intervention, one family therapy task is to assert generational boundaries and reduce parentification (Goldman & Coane, 1977).

Child and other family factors could also lead to parentification. In relation to self-control, the child's internal locus of control significantly moderates the relationship between the child's parentification during childhood and depression and happiness ratings during adulthood (Williams & Francis, 2010). Parentification was also higher among siblings of adolescents with anorexia nervosa (Matthews et al., 2020). The oldest child might likely be responsible for their younger siblings. Studies on immigrant families in Germany have demonstrated higher levels of parentification among adolescents, and that the mother-adolescent acculturation gap corresponded to the emotional parentification levels (Titzmann, 2012). In another study age-appropriate role-taking was observed in more cohesive rather than conflicted immigrant families in Israel (Walsh et al., 2006). Among military families living in base camps, adolescents were parentified more during parental military deployments, specifically when the father figure was absent (Harrison & Albanese, 2012). Chen and Panebianco (2019) reported a small to medium correlation between parental illness and adolescent parentification, which suggested parental illness as a risk factor. Parents with mental health problems (Gilford & Reynolds, 2011), chronic illnesses, such as migraine (Fagan, 2003), or substance abuse (Terdgård et al., 2019), might parentify their children.

Mechanism behind parentification outcomes. Children's appraisals

of the parentification experience may determine its outcome. As illustrated among families that experienced domestic violence, parentification experience is associated with how children appraise the situation and blame themselves (Fortin et al., 2011). Similarly, the child's internal locus of control, which moderates the relationship between parentification and the child's mood, affected parentification psychological outcomes (Williams & Francis, 2010). Moreover, the notion that attachment styles and children's internal working models are possible underlying mechanisms that influence parentification outcomes was supported (Baggett et al., 2015).

McGauran et al. (2019) suggested that parentification may be beneficial among children who did not perceive it as unfair. Consequently, higher depressive symptom scores in adulthood (Cho & Lee, 2019), decreased self-esteem, and reduced feelings of attractiveness (Black & Sleight, 2013) were identified among parentified individuals who perceived unfairness when they were children. Perceived fairness likely determines parentification outcomes, even for families with a collectivistic culture that values filial responsibility (Cho & Lee, 2019). In that Korean study, the authors also demonstrated that longer duration and earlier onset of parentification were two important factors leading to depression. Nevertheless, in an earlier study, Stein (2007) reported that early parentification predicted an improvement in children's adaptive coping skills and was not associated with subsequent emotional distress. These positive effects were coherent with psychological, health, and relationship adjustment in adulthood, which was mediated by individuation (Perrin et al., 2013). Contrastingly, children who grew up with substance-abusing parents encountered dysfunctional communication and developed cognitive dissonance through parental denial of the issue that the children witnessed daily at home (Terdgård et al., 2019). Thus, the children might develop a poor idea of self and perform parentification to cope with the lack of parental warmth and positive parent-child interaction.

An analysis of sociodemographic backgrounds revealed that ethnicity was an important mediator between parentification and its positive or negative outcomes. Khafi et al. (2014) showed how parentification may impair the parent-child relationship in families of European American origin. Family strength (illustrated by parental compassion and appreciation) (Nurwianti et al., 2019) potentially minimized behavioral problems attributed to parentification. Conversely, poor paternal emotional engagement, maternal helplessness, and family crises, such as parental illness, conflicts, or divorce, facilitated parentification in a family and led to the development of maladaptive schemas in children (Biażek, 2018).

3.2. Positive parentification outcomes

Parent-child and sibling relationships. Sixteen articles summarized the positive parentification outcomes. In a sample of low-income African American and European American mother-child dyads, Khafi et al. (2014) demonstrated the positive effect of emotional and instrumental parentification in improving parent-child relationship quality. This was supported by McMahan and Luthar's (2007) findings that moderate maternal emotional parentification levels were associated with less psychological distress and behavioral problems and better parent-child relationships as compared to more complex emotional parentification. Tompkins (2007) studied 23 children with HIV-positive mothers to examine the link between parentification and parenting and demonstrated that parentification was associated with positive parenting. Following this positive effect on parenting, sibling-focused parentification created positive sibling relationships and vice versa (Tomeny et al., 2017).

Self-esteem and mental health. Hooper et al. (2008) suggested that parentification could help children develop positive affect and optimism. Parentification was also positively associated with self-esteem, which was mediated by sibling relationships (Borchet et al., 2020). Although Byng-Hall (2008) warned against permanent adult-child

boundary-crossing in parentification, parentification enhanced the child's self-esteem if the role-taking was delegated openly and supported by the parents. Moreover, emotional parentification was not associated with child maladjustment, where parentified children were well-adjusted and had lower depressive symptoms levels and higher social competence (Tompkins, 2007). Parentification predicted less alcohol and tobacco use (Stein et al., 2007) but not antisocial behavior (McGauran et al., 2019). Similarly, Shin and Hecht (2013) reported that parent-child communication about alcohol ameliorated negative parentification effects. The beneficial influence of parentification among poor families was observed in the form of reduced delinquent behavior (Nurwianti et al., 2019) and decreased adolescent intention to have sex (Sang et al., 2014).

Resilience and responsibility. Parentification positively predicted resilience (Yew et al. 2017) and better coping (Stein et al., 2007). For example, despite many challenges, parentified Black women were able to fully engage in the college experience (Gilford & Reynolds, 2011). Moreover, higher parentification exposure levels were associated with better school adjustment and social functioning (Wang et al., 2017). Culturally, Yew et al. (2017) asserted that parentification might be more positive in Asian cultures, which espouse the virtue of respect for parents and elders. Nonetheless, a longitudinal study involving a Western sample also demonstrated high social responsibility levels among parentified children, specifically among sons with moderate instrumental parentification levels (Hetherington, 1999).

Emotional vs instrumental parentification. Emotional parentification was associated with greater social responsibility in both daughters and sons (Hetherington, 1999) and less psychological distress and behavioral problems among children with divorced parents (McMahon & Luthar, 2007a). Moreover, emotional parentification resulted in increased parent-child relationship quality in low-income families (Khafi et al., 2014; McMahon & Luthar, 2007a), lower depressive symptom levels, higher social competence, and more positive parenting (Tompkins, 2007). Conversely, instrumental parentification predicted self-efficacy (Titzmann, 2012). The differential outcomes of these parentification types are perhaps best summarized by Chen and Panebianco (2019), who demonstrated a less detrimental effect from instrumental rather than emotional parentification. Their findings echoed Byng-Hall's (2008) suggestion that emotional tasks are a highly challenging for children and Hooper and Wallace's (2010) findings that emotional parentification was significantly related to several children's psychological distress measures. Overall, there was mixed evidence on whether emotional or instrumental parentification is superior rendering them the loose ends regarding parentification benefits.

Despite these interesting findings, the positive effect of parentification appears to rely on other existing factors. For example, a study of children whose parents had cancer reported five coping strategies by the children, among which was parentification, which was either adaptive or destructive in the presence or absence of emotional support, respectively (Thastum et al., 2008). Grandparents' emotional support also significantly improved parentified grandchildren's quality of life (Napura, 2016). Moreover, parentification predicted prosocial behaviors among children whose siblings were diagnosed with autism, but this apparent benefit depended on the child's perception and experience of their sibling caretaking (Beffel & Nuttall, 2020).

In summary, some strategies optimize children's experience of parentification. Nurturing relationships with siblings and grandparents by investing in quality time and other relationship-strengthening activities could help the parentified children become well-adjusted. In addition, by openly delegating age-appropriate roles to their children and positively validating them, parents could help children adjust well to the parentification process. Eventually, children's perceptions on their role-taking plays a part in optimizing the impact of parentification on them.

3.3. Negative parentification outcomes

Psychological distress and depression. Twenty-four articles summarized the negative parentification outcomes. Despite evidence of its benefits, emotional parentification predicted psychological distress among affected children (Hooper et al., 2008). High parent-focused parentification levels during childhood and low social support during adulthood were associated with psychological distress in adulthood (Tomeny et al., 2017). Moreover, parentification was associated with adult depression (Cho & Lee, 2019) and mediated the relationship between parenting behaviors and depressive symptoms in younger adolescents aged 11 to 14 years (Burton et al., 2018).

Interpersonal relationships. Khafi et al. (2014) has demonstrated that both emotional and instrumental parentification was associated mainly with decreased parent-child relationship quality. Moreover, parentification apparently exerted a major influence on the affected children's future relationships. After controlling for maternal parentification levels, it was determined that paternal parentification was negatively associated with romantic relationship satisfaction among daughters (Baggett et al., 2015). After studying the influence of mother-adolescent parentification and intimacy between same-sex best friends, Goldner et al. (2019) suggested that feelings of rejection among adolescents might be generalized into intimate relationship difficulties. Moreover, emotional parentification was negatively associated with constructive communication and positively correlated with avoidant and anxious attachment-related cognitions among college students (Madden & Shaffer, 2016).

Caregiving ability. Parentification may also influence a person's ability to care for their child, where parentified children may not be good caregivers later in life. Parentification and perceived unfairness during childhood were related to negative feelings toward the parents (Black & Sleight, 2013). Nuttall et al. (2015) noted that a maternal history of parentification was associated with poorer infant development knowledge and subsequently less warmth towards 18-month-old children, although this might subsequently improve.

Beffel and Nuttall (2020) suggested that sibling-focused parentification might negatively predict prosocial behavior when a child did not have a positive experience caring for their sibling. Nuttall et al. (2018) differentiated between children's experience of parent-focused parentification and sibling-focused parentification and whether the different experiences resulted in different caregiving intentions in adulthood. The authors established that children with parent-focused parentification experienced fewer perceived benefits of caregiving and hence had less intention to provide future caregiving, while those with sibling-focused parentification had no greater intention to care for siblings (Nuttall et al., 2018).

Psychological and behavioral effects. Children who provide parent-focused emotional caregiving may perceive their feelings as a burden to their parents and therefore develop uncertainty in sharing their own emotions (Van Parys et al., 2015). Consequently, emotional parentification significantly predicted psychological distress among college students (Hooper et al., 2008). Nonetheless, Eşkisü (2021) emphasized that parentification only predicted a child's psychological well-being indirectly through proactivity.

Parentification has also been studied in the context of its association with impostor syndrome. First studied among female high achievers (Clance & Imes, 1978), impostor syndrome occurs when a person doubts their skills, knowledge, or talents, and is related to adolescent mental health problems (Lester & Moderski, 1995). Impostor feelings in adulthood are a significant long-term effect of childhood parentification (Castro et al., 2004).

Childhood parentification was also significantly related to defensive splitting (Wells & Jones, 1998), an immature psychological defense that fails to combine both positive and negative qualities of the self and others into a realistic whole, and difficulties in self-regulation (Janowski & Hooper, 2014), a process through which a person monitors

their emotional state and responses to stimuli. Moreover, parentification was related to Machiavellianism, a trait of manipulateness, callousness, and indifference to morality (Lång, 2016). The experience of parentification could jeopardize a child's ability to subsequently provide parental warmth. Consequently, a maternal history of parentification in the family of origin was associated with increased symptoms of externalizing behaviors in children (Nuttall et al., 2012). In an interesting longitudinal study from the antenatal to three years postnatal period, Nuttall et al. (2019) documented that a maternal history of instrumental parentification posed the risk of externalizing behaviors on the next generation. Among children parentified by mentally ill parents, not only was parentification associated with internalizing and externalizing behavior problem cross-sectionally, but it also predicted internalizing behavior problem after one year (Van Loon et al., 2017). In another longitudinal study, emotional and instrumental parentification were both associated with increased externalizing behaviors (Khafi et al., 2014).

The evidence seems to support the association between childhood parentification and negative future caregiving ability (Nuttall et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the authors only focused on first-time mothers. In examining sibling-focused parentification, Maysless et al. (2004), Nuttall et al. (2018), and Tomeny et al. (2017) focused on the siblings of children with autism spectrum disorder. The use of retrospective reports of parentification was also frequent (Baggett et al., 2015; Castro et al., 2004). Nevertheless, parentification appears to affect children of any age or birth order, children who have parents with mental or physical illness, victims of domestic violence, in clinical and community settings, and regardless of educational or socioeconomic level.

The list of papers contributing to each of these three constructs is shown in Table 2.

4. Discussion

Adult role-taking by children is an established phenomenon. There is ongoing concern that parentification could destabilize child development and well-being, which is an idea that stemmed from the long-term effects observed in adolescents and young adults. Nevertheless, whether parentification is a form of toxic stress remains undetermined (Nelson et al., 2020). Although parentification may be viewed as a form of early childhood adversity (McLaughlin, 2016), there is evidence that this experience could be beneficial for children.

Parentification literature has demonstrated the associations between parentification antecedents and outcomes, where causal relationships clearly could not be established. Therefore, it is possible that these antecedents might contribute to parentification benefits and harms either directly or indirectly. Nonetheless, the role of parentification may lie within a mediating rather than a causative pathway. For example, Burton et al. (2018) reported that parentification mediated the association between parental involvement and depressive symptoms in early adolescents. The authors suggested that the perceived benefits of parentification may thus be protective in some children. While it is understood that parentification may not directly lead to its outcomes, efforts to identify the elements of adaptive parentification should be commended. Therefore, this review aimed to provide an understanding of the parentification concept and outcomes and examine the components that have rendered parentification adaptive in some children.

In this review, evidence on the benefits of instrumental over emotional parentification was inconclusive. Therefore, instrumental parentification is not suggested to be a better version of role-taking for children. Rather, suggestions are made to prevent complex emotional parentification. Moreover, individual articles had limitations, for example, retrospective reports of maternal or paternal parentification were common. As with many other latent characteristics, measurements have traditionally been made through self-reports with items scored using Likert scales. Although the Parentification Questionnaire (PQ) (Hooper & Wallace, 2010), Parentification Inventory (PI) (Hooper et al.,

Table 2

List of publications describing each construct in this review.

Construct	No.	Author/Authors (Year)
(i) Parentification concept		
Subconstruct		
Definition of parentification	1.	Athamneh & Benjamin (2019)
	2.	Callaghan et al. (2016)
	3.	Chen & Panebianco (2019)
	4.	Godsall et al. (2004)
	5.	Hetherington (1999)
	6.	Hooper & Wallace (2010)
	7.	Koerner et al. (2004)
	8.	Napora, E. (2016)
	9.	Nuttall et al. (2018)
	10.	Nuttall et al. (2019)
	11.	Shin & Hecht (2013)
	12.	Tomeny et al. (2016)
	13.	Van Parys & Rober (2013)
Risk factors of parentification	1.	Biażek, M. (2018)
	2.	Borchet & Lewandowska-Walter (2017)
	3.	Burnett et al. (2006)
	4.	Chen & Panebianco (2019)
	5.	Fagan (2003)
	6.	Gilford & Reynolds (2011)
	7.	Goldman & Coane (1977)
	8.	Harrison & Albanese (2012)
	9.	Hetherington (1999)
	10.	Hooper et al. (2015)
	11.	Jurkovic et al. (2001)
	12.	Kelley et al. (2007)
	13.	Matthews et al. (2020)
	14.	Maysless et al. (2004)
	15.	Perrin et al. (2013)
	16.	Tedgård et al. (2019)
	17.	Titzmann (2012)
	18.	Walsh et al. (2006)
	19.	Wang et al. (2017)
	20.	Williams & Francis (2010)
	21.	Żarczyńska-Hyla et al. (2019)
Mechanism behind parentification outcomes	1.	Baggett et al. (2015)
	2.	Black & Sleight (2013)
	3.	Biażek (2018)
	4.	Cho & Lee (2019)
	5.	Fortin et al. (2011)
	6.	Khafi et al. (2014)
	7.	McGauran et al. (2019)
	8.	Nurwianti et al. (2019)
	9.	Perrin et al. (2013)
	10.	Stein et al. (2007)
	11.	Tedgård et al. (2019)
	12.	Williams & Francis (2010)
(ii) Positive outcomes of parentification		
Parent-child and sibling relationship	1.	Khafi et al. (2014)
	2.	McMahon & Luthar (2007)
	3.	Tompkins (2007)
	4.	Tomeny et al. (2016)
Self-esteem and mental health	1.	Borchet et al. (2020)
	2.	Byng-Hall (2008)
	3.	Hooper et al. (2008)
	4.	McGauran et al. (2019)
	5.	Nurwianti et al. (2019)
	6.	Sang et al. (2014)
	7.	Shin & Hecht (2013)
	8.	Stein et al. (2007)
	9.	Tompkins (2007)
Resilience and responsibility	1.	Gilford & Reynolds (2011)
	2.	Hetherington (1999)
	3.	Stein et al. (2007)
	4.	Wang et al. (2017)
	5.	Yew et al. (2017)
Emotional vs instrumental parentification	1.	Beffel & Nuttall (2020)
	2.	Byng-Hall, J. (2008)
	3.	Chen & Panebianco (2019)

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Construct		
	4.	Hetherington (1999)
	5.	Hooper & Wallace (2010)
	6.	Khafi et al. (2014)
	7.	McMahon & Luthar (2007)
	8.	Napora (2016)
	9.	Thastum et al. (2008)
	10.	Titzmann (2012)
	11.	Tompkins (2007)
(iii) Negative outcomes of parentification		
Psychological distress and depression	1.	Burton et al. (2018)
	2.	Cho & Lee (2019)
	3.	Jankowski & Hooper (2012)
	4.	Tomeny et al. (2016)
Interpersonal relationship	1.	Baggett et al. (2015)
	2.	Goldner et al. (2019)
	3.	Khafi et al. (2014)
	4.	Madden, A. R., & Shaffer (2016)
Caregiving ability	1.	Beffel & Nuttall (2020)
	2.	Black & Sleight (2013)
	3.	Nuttall et al. (2018)
Psychological and behavioral impact	1.	Baggett et al. (2015)
	2.	Castro et al. (2004)
	3.	Clance & Imes (1978)
	4.	Eşkisü, M. (2021)
	5.	Hooper et al. (2008)
	6.	Jankowski & Hooper (2014)
	7.	Khafi et al. (2014)
	8.	Láng, A. (2016)
	9.	Lester & Moderski (1995)
	10.	Mayseless et al. (2004)
	11.	Nuttall et al. (2018)
	12.	Nuttall et al. (2012)
	13.	Nuttall et al. (2015)
	14.	Nuttall et al. (2019)
	15.	Tomeny et al. (2016)
	16.	Van Loon et al. (2017)
	17.	Van Parys et al. (2015)
	18.	Wells & Jones (1998)

2011), and Parentification Scale (PS) (Hooper & Doehler, 2012) are valid and reliable retrospective measures (Hooper & Doehler, 2012), motivational factors may influence how an emotional experience, such as parentification, is recalled (Lench & Levine, 2010). Relying on such methods might lead to response biases and compromise study validity. Moreover, a recurrent parentification theme was detected among high-risk families, specifically divorced, poor, and immigrant families, and when parents were ill or struggling with alcoholism. Although parental marital issues negatively affected children's well-being (Amato et al., 1995; Garriga & Pennoni, 2020), there were fewer studies on children with parents with mental illness (Cudjoe et al., 2021). Thus, risk stratification could be performed to identify such children who are at the highest risk of parentification.

4.1. Elements of parentification with positive outcomes

This review highlighted several critical learning curves and documented evidence on the positive and negative parentification trajectories. The components that could make parentification adaptive for children were supportive and positive relationships with siblings and grandparents and other emotional support amid role-taking experience, parents assigning role-taking openly and supporting their children, children's appraisal and perception of parentification, and age-appropriate role-taking. As children develop through life adversities, emotional support from family members is one of the most crucial aspects to prevent long-term complications (Fritz et al., 2018; Shepherd et al., 2021).

A good sibling relationship also exerts a positive influence on a child's future well-being (Shepherd et al., 2021). Parents can optimize

these elements by assigning children age-appropriate roles and combining them with positive validation. Furthermore, parental appreciation of adult role-taking is important in children's emotional regulation (Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2014). It was also evident from this review that children would have a better outcome if they do not consider parentification unfair. Thus, the cultural norm that views adult role-taking as an act of filial piety may influence how children appraise the situation. Teng et al. (2021) noted that societal high regard and respect for their parents played a role in children's positive parentification experience. Subsequently, a child's proactive attitude may aid prevention of the negative effects of parentification on their psychological well-being and resilience (Eşkisü, 2021).

4.2. Preventing the destructive effects of parentification

Based on the synthesized evidence, some parentification elements should be avoided as they could be damaging to children. Despite conflicting evidence, many studies advocated opposing emotional parentification (Byng-Hall, 2008; Chen & Panebianco, 2019; Hooper & Wallace, 2010). Emotional parentification is exacerbated by a complex form of maternal emotional parentification (McMahon & Luthar, 2007), frequently observed post-divorce. Mothers are criticized for overburdening their daughters with their marital issues and psychological distress (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). When children become advocates for their parent's positions, their loyalties are frequently divided between the two parents and their psychosocial development could be disrupted (Goldman & Coane, 1977). Moreover, a permanent, longer form of parentification indicates that boundary-crossing occurs for a longer duration and potentially becomes pathological (Byng-Hall, 2008). Furthermore, based on the study on families with alcoholic parents, Shin and Hecht (2013) suggested that the lack of parent-child communication on the issues that led to parentification would not empower parentified children. Finally, it should be understood that cultural expectations are involved in shaping children's appraisal of parentification and the resultant effect (Yew et al., 2017). Briefly, the risk factors for negative parentification outcomes are emotional parentification, specifically the complex type, prolonged parentification, lack of relevant parent-child communication, and cultural factors.

4.3. Cultural perspectives of parentification

Culture influences caregiving duties and parent-child relationships. Cho and Lee (2019) proposed that a collectivistic culture influences parentification experience differently from an individualistic culture. Children from cultural backgrounds that do not hold older adults in higher esteem may not have a better appraisal and experience of parentification. Nonetheless, the virtue of filial piety held by Asian cultures might change in postmodern societies. A meta-analysis that compared cross-cultural attitudes toward older adults demonstrated high negativity in East Asia as compared with South and Southeast Asia, which was moderated by the rise in population aging (North & Fiske, 2015). Alternatively, in parenting, what one culture considers parental rights may be regarded as parental responsibilities in another culture (Byng-Hall, 2008).

As parentification is likely to be culture-bound (Kerig, 2005), parentification views must always be implied with an understanding of cultural norms. Correspondingly, cultural variation in reporting parentification experience should be expected. A mixed-method study that compared college students' parent-child boundary dissolution experiences in India and the United States revealed that the Indian participants held more positive views on parentification than their American counterparts (Jackson et al., 2016). Hence, role-taking experiences are culturally unique (Shin & Hecht, 2013) and might be more compatible with some cultures (Khafi & Yates, 2014). This cultural distinction may lie in separation-individuation, which is also believed to be culturally influenced. For example, Western culture promotes independence in

youth as soon as they start college, but this occurs more gradually in other cultures, where varying levels of parental involvement in youths remain (Preciado, 2020).

4.4. Implications for practice and research

During a global crisis, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic, parents from any societal level inadvertently practice parentification. The concurrent rise in parenting and parents' general stress is expected to negatively affect children's well-being. Addressing parentification during the current pandemic can be very meaningful yet complicated. It is important to note the evidence in the existing literature when offering psychosocial support to families. Based on the knowledge gained from this review, the subsequent crucial step is appropriate psychological intervention for families. Healthcare practitioners could educate parents on the adaptive aspects of adult role-taking. Future research should examine the prevalence of parentification during the pandemic and examine the different parentification types. Moreover, the cross-cultural experience of parentification is another under-studied field. Given the state of the field, mixed-method approaches may be valuable for closing more gaps in the in-depth understanding of the parentification experience.

4.5. Limitations and strengths

While the study added significantly to the literature, the primary limitation was the complete reliance on previously published research and the subsequent risk of selection bias. Consequently, the findings had limited generalizability. Moreover, the subjective nature of literature selection, synthesis, and deriving conclusions in a narrative review receives constant criticism. Nevertheless, peer-reviewed articles from the primary literature sources were included in this review to filter out poor-quality and invalid articles. Additionally, during literature search, limited articles examined parentification within the context of the pandemic. As the parentification subject is also constantly evolving, new research findings are anticipated shortly. Despite these limitations, this review assembled the potentially adaptive components of parentification. Furthermore, the combination of quantitative and qualitative studies in this review provided a complete view of the parentification effect grounded in children's experiences.

5. Conclusion

For the past five decades, the parentification effect on children has been documented, with more negative than positive effects. Using a narrative approach, this review examined the concept and outcomes of parentification. The adaptive parentification components and maladaptive parentification risk factors were summarized using synthesized information from previous studies. The findings underscored the goal that parentification becomes an empowering rite of passage for children. As Earley and Cushway (2002) stated, "One may have undertaken extensive caretaking roles as a child but, because of protective factors, or maturation and development throughout the lifespan, have remained 'un-parentified' as an adult".

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ruziana Masiran: Methodology, Data curation. **Normala Ibrahim:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Hamidin Awang:** Data curation, Writing – review & editing. **Lim Poh Ying:** Methodology.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2022.106709>.

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