

When children with substance-abusing parents grow up and become parents themselves: A commentary

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In the article “An upbringing with substance-abusing parents: Experiences of parentification and dysfunctional communication”, Eva Tedgård, Maria Råstam, and Ingegerd Wirtberg (2019) take on an important research question by exploring the impact on children of a childhood with parental substance abuse, when these children become parents themselves. Even though earlier research has already established linkages between such childhood experiences and problems in adulthood based on register data, and, further, a general linkage between generations in ways of parenting, the need for support to new parents who as children lived with substance-abusing parents has not been recognised enough. This is, in spite of the article’s heading, the most important contribution of this article.

Based on interviews with parents who seek support in their parenting of a young child, the

authors show that childhood experiences of parental substance misuse follow the children into adulthood in several ways and have a negative impact on them as parents. The harm done to the children in terms of neglect and child abuse, the children’s parentification strategy and the culture and conspiracy of silence concerning the problems in the family, all contribute to lasting psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, lack of self-confidence, insecurity and lack of trust in others. This in turn negatively affects the children’s own parenting and relationships to their young children. The article, from a new angle, contributes motives for early interventions in children’s lives when their parents have addiction problems, but also encourages support to parents with this background. The article further demonstrates that, when professionals investigate these childhoods, it is not enough to focus on the harm

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done to the children in terms of neglect and child abuse. It is crucial also to uncover the dynamics and effects of family strategies of silence and parentification, which are common in these families.

The conceptualisation of parentification in the article is, however, somewhat confusing. The authors refer to Bowlby's (1988) two kinds of parentification, where one kind encompasses self-reliance, controlling/punishing behaviour and the other caring and helpful behaviour. The authors then quote a definition of Chase, Deming, and Wells (1998) encompassing care for the needs of a parent such as practical care and emotional care related to the parent's feelings, the latter according to Haxhe (2016) divided into two forms: the child as a scapegoat or the "perfect" child. The authors do not discuss the difference between these conceptualisations and do not make clear which one they use. Is the child who refuses to help the intoxicated parent really an example of parentification? It is further unclear in the analysis of the data whether the authors found differences in the negative impact related to which kind of parentification the parents had experienced. Could they also have experienced different forms during their childhood? Haugland (2006) and Lindgaard (2006) argue that parentification under certain circumstances can be positive for children, that is, if the burden is not too heavy and if the parents show that they appreciate the child's effort. Children may talk in positive terms about the skills and the independence they developed due to parentification (Alexanderson & Näsman, 2015). Such positive aspects are not present in this article. Do children's views on their parentification change during the life course? There is a need for further research on parentification, its different forms, dynamics and meaning to children and parents.

The structure in the first empirical part is also a bit confusing since some aspects are mentioned in other categories than those to which they primarily seem to belong, such as when not seeking help and lack of trust are mentioned in the category labelled *Inadequate self preservation*, at the same time as they are

part of another category label, *Difficulties with trust – difficulties asking for help*. Broken promises, children's difficulties in understanding what is going on and substance misuse of their own, are also each mentioned in two categories. These kinds of overlaps are not commented upon. It is further not always clear which the relationships are between the different aspects included in a particular category. This illustrates the need for further development of our ways of systematising and conceptualising the many aspects children tell about from a childhood with substance-misusing parents.

The authors are cautious in their conclusions since they draw on retrospective data, dating decades back in time. The interviewees' retrospective descriptions of how parental substance abuse played out in their families, what they as children were exposed to, the harm that was done to them, and the feelings this evoked in them is in coherence with stories told by children and young people during their childhood in earlier research. Children and young people have also earlier described the culture of silence, the ambivalent role of the other parent and their own strategies. There does not seem to be any reason to doubt the childhood descriptions these adults have given. A few additional studies from children's own perspectives are Alexanderson et al (2017), Christensen (1995a, 1995b), Cork (1973), and Moore, McArthur, and Noble-Carr (2010).

The questions raised above do not detract from the great value the article has in highlighting the serious problems of these children and how the impact of their childhoods continues and becomes a hindrance for the good parenting they wish to achieve when adults. The article also stresses a fact that professionals tend to neglect – that children and adults who on the surface seem well adapted can still suffer from their experiences from this kind of childhood and be in need of help and support.

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