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Parent–child role-confusion: A critical review of an emerging concept



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ABSTRACT

We propose that role-confusion or role reversal between parent and child is a major risk factor for a child's development, yet one that has gone largely unnoticed. In the context of an evolutionary tension between parental reproductive needs and child needs for nurturing, parental history and current stressors may affect the ability to invest in parenting a particular child. When adult relationships do not provide adequate emotional and instrumental support to the parent, he or she may look to a child to provide that support. A growing empirical literature across clinical, family systems and developmental disciplines has pointed to the potential for the child to take on the role of parent, spouse, or peer in relation to the parent, such that traditional parent–child roles become confused or reversed and generational boundaries blurred. From a developmental psychopathology perspective, this change in parent–child role relations may adversely affect the child's socio-emotional development if demands placed on the child exceed the capacity to comply, thus increasing the risk for psychopathology. Conversely, shouldering family responsibilities that are within the developmental capacities of the child may lead to increased self-efficacy and competence. This paper critically reviews the growing literature, proposes a model for precursors to, and sequelae of, role-confusion, examines resilience, and points to directions for future research and preventive interventions.

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Introduction

The parent–child relationship is considered to be extremely important for healthy child development regardless of theoretical orientation (Cox & Harter, 2003; Laird, Pettit, Dodge, & Bates, 2003; Malone, Westen, & Levendosky, 2011; Patterson & Fisher, 2002; Sroufe, 2002; Toth, Rogosch, Manly, & Cicchetti, 2006). How parents (or other primary caregivers) interact with a child influences social–emotional development in significant ways, and deviations may have detrimental effects. One such deviation is role-confusion: when a parent looks to a child to meet the parent's needs. However, the study of child development has neglected role-confusion, in part because of the use of multiple terms (including role reversal, parentification, and boundary dissolution), which are scattered across multiple literatures (developmental, clinical, and family systems).

The parent–child relationship evolved to protect the child long enough to carry the parent's genes to a new generation. However, as evolutionary anthropologists such as Hrdy (2009) have pointed out, a parent's need to reproduce does not map exactly onto a particular child's need for nurturing care, and may in fact be in conflict. Preoccupied by his or her own needs, including from an evolutionary viewpoint the need to survive, bear children, and bring the largest possible number of children to reproductive age, a parent may be unable adequately to meet a child's needs. The parent may instead contribute to a family system in which the child tries to take over some of the psychological and social functions usually performed as part of the parental role.

There is evidence that role-confusion appears in the first few years of life, is detrimental to success at developmental issues from infancy to adulthood, and carries from one generation to the next. However, this inversion in the roles of child and parent often escapes notice not only because of the sparse and scattered literature, but also because descriptively, the child who has taken over parental functions may appear precociously mature, and the relationship between parent and child especially strong. For example, a young child may be particularly helpful and empathic toward a distressed parent, a parent may seem exceptionally affectionate when asking a child for kisses, or a parent may seem to be especially playful as a child's best friend. These factors obscure a cumulative understanding of the effects of role-confusion on child development.

The goal of this review is to bring the significance of this deviation in the parent–child relationship to the attention of developmental researchers and clinicians. We unite the literature under the term “role-confusion.” We integrate theory, review empirical literature, and propose a developmental model for precursors to, and sequelae of, role-confusion. We consider when role-confusion is associated with developmental burden and deviation and when it is associated with developmental progress and success. We review key (not all) studies, provide evidence for stability and intergenerational transmission, examine resilience, and suggest directions for future research. Because attachment theory underlies much of the developmental work on role-confusion, we draw most heavily from that literature while also integrating research from other traditions. We ask four important questions: Which contexts are associated with role-confusion? What are the effects of role-confusion on development? Is there stability over time and intergenerational transmission of role-confusion? Is there evidence that role-confusion may sometimes have a positive effect?

Terminology and measurement

We first discuss the terminology used to describe role-confusion and provide a table of commonly used measures. Terms include parentification, role reversal, boundary dissolution, parent as child, parent as peer, and parent as spouse. What they have in common is that child and parent roles shift such that either the child performs psychological and instrumental functions usually carried out by the parent for the child, or functions usually performed by another adult for the parent. We review the evolution of the construct and terminology in the past 50 years and conclude that, for our purposes, “role-confusion” provides the best umbrella term.

Although Freud did not focus on variations in the mother–child relationship, later object relations theorists brought its vicissitudes to the foreground of psychoanalytic thinking (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). In the 1960s, Winnicott introduced “false self” to describe a child's attempts to hide his or her true feelings and conform to the parent's needs and expectations (Winnicott, 1962). Also in the 1960s,

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