



# Episode 3

## Understanding how parentification occurs and its impact on the family hierarchy

### Overview

Recent studies indicate that American Families eat dinner together about 50% of the time. Another study found that families only ate dinner together three times per week.

Nevertheless, both research and families agree that eating family dinner with your teens at least five times a week can be a significant protective factor in reducing teen substance abuse.

However, countless families struggle to integrate this into extended schedules and the demands of school and work.

### Topic

This episode featured extensive discussions on culture, parenting styles and family roles as it relates to immigrant families acculturating in the United States.

### Family System

Tonight's episode featured a family of three. Mom was accompanied by her two daughters ages 24 and 14. The family system originated in Brazil and throughout the last 24 years has spent time living in their native country while also spending time here in the United States with both daughters having attended schools in both Brazil and the United States.

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## Risk and Protective Factors

This episode features an in-depth look at several protective factors, as well as risk factors.

Protective Factors	Risk Factors
Willing family members	Parentified sibling structure and its influence on family hierarchy
Strong connection to culture and traditions	Disrupted support system due to immigration and geography
Healthy peer groups	Potentially ambiguous hierarchical structure
Stable home environment	

## Clinical Overview

Tonight's family offered a window into the experience of many immigrant families throughout the U.S. According to census bureau statistics, immigrants and their children comprise 26% of the U.S. population, adding up to 85 million people. Here in Florida, the percentage of immigrant families is larger, comprising 34% of the population.<sup>1</sup>

Many first-generation students face a number of challenges in the acculturation process: learning the language, parents unfamiliar with the US educational system operations, school uniforms vs. flexible dress codes and being geographically distant from extended family supports. Meta-analysis of surveys of Latin immigrants in the United States have revealed that common concerns include difficulties with lack of social support and mutual aid that was present in their home-country, and stress regarding unfamiliarity with common cultural practices.<sup>2</sup> This family offered some invaluable insight into the impact this experience has on sibling relationships and parental engagement, most specifically, the parentified sibling phenomenon.

This phenomenon occurs when the parental hierarchy is unclear or unavailable for any reason. This can happen through deliberate choices like abandonment or overworking but also circumstances outside of one's locus of control like military service, death or illness (physical, mental or even addiction).

For many immigrant families this can happen when a child tries to fill in a gap related to language barriers, financial demands pulling parents to long work hours or even simply serving as a cultural ambassador teaching their parents "the way of the new culture". This family shared that mom worked 80 hours a week at one particular point in their development.

Our family featured siblings of a substantial age difference of 10 years. This age difference, along with parental availability, created an environment where one sibling assumed a parentified role in the family structure. Scientists have found many complex causes of children taking on the emotional and instrumental role of being their sibling's 'parent'. Most importantly, this phenomenon almost always occurs due to needs created by social circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-florida>

<sup>2</sup><https://isc.idaho.gov/cp/docs/The Impact of Migration Acculturation on Latino Children Families Implications for CW Practice.pdf>

Children surveyed from families that chose – out of preference rather than necessity – to encourage the adoption of care-taking responsibilities and sibling care-taking, don't report having been felt emotionally and literally responsible for their siblings' well-being. Parentified siblings, on the other hand, are children who truly adopt the responsibility of their siblings' development and well-being. This is most usually seen in either parental absence, underprivileged families where parents are required to work intense hours, or those with severe parental psychopathology.<sup>3</sup>

Parentified siblings often feel placed in a position “above their pay grade” where the role demands that they make decisions and take action on limited experience. These children often become responsible for many aspects of care-taking that are usually the function of parents, including but not limited to: disciplining, ensuring school attendance, housework, homework completion, transportation, feeding, responding to emotional outbursts, and much more.<sup>4</sup>

These children can experience higher levels of responsibility, obligation and the subsequent fear, anxiety and insecurity associated with struggling to fill their role. Tonight's episode specifically explored this impact from the perspective of both the younger sibling and parentified older sibling. It is important to note that parentified sibling roles are often but not exclusively related to age differences as many families feature a younger sibling pseudo-parenting an older sibling.

This often results in a sibling relationship that is not only hierarchical in nature but also fraught with anxiety, uncertainty and a strange combination of immense love, concern and a flavor of mistrust and fear. While a considerable amount of research suggests that parentified children may form tight-knit sibling relationships due to a mutual need for familial closeness and support, these relationships have been shown to be wrought with tension and anxiety.

Young children are usually unable to adopt the responsibility of taking care of a younger sibling's emotional and disobedient behavior without becoming either permissive or authoritarian. Even according to self reports study measures, parentified children report that their reactions to their siblings were frequently controlling and filled with anxiety and dispute.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8039449/>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3471375/>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/child-psychology-and-psychiatry-review/article/abs/parentified-child-early-competence-or-childhood-deprivation/840803F9651B41B1F46FE96686E99C9A>

Of most particular significance in tonight's episode is the hierarchical structure of family systems and parenting styles. Many parents choose a style (authoritarian, authoritative and permissive). These parenting decisions are often a deliberate choice made by parents in the early phases of their development as a family system. Authoritarian parenting involves establishing uncompromising rules, harsh punishments and no negotiation. Authoritarian parents show less affection and nurturing characteristics while maintaining high expectations.

Longitudinal studies reveal that deviant behavior is consistently linked with parental coercion and rigidity. In such families, children's growing need for independence and autonomy in early adolescence is frequently expressed through rebellion, providing children with the false feeling of autonomy.

Children of authoritarian parents are more likely to develop externalizing disorders, characterized by maladaptive deviant and disruptive behavior in responses to recurring emotional dysregulation. Studies have also revealed that adolescents from harsh and strict homes are more likely to question and disrespect authority in adolescence.<sup>6</sup>

Permissive parents are warm and nurturing and high in responsiveness, but tend to have almost no rules or expectations. Discipline is rarely used, and children are allowed to decide for themselves when they go to bed, whether to do their homework, and how much they eat. This style of parenting has been associated very strongly with increased impulsivity, emotional dysregulation, and health issues such as insomnia, obesity, and eating disorders.<sup>7</sup>

Authoritative parents discipline through reason and power while attempting to maintain a nurturing, responsive and communicative relationship. Children's noncompliance is treated with firm enforcement of the rule, rather than as an act of hostile defiance against the authority of the parent. This style of parenting has been linked to higher levels of academic achievement, self-regulation, decreased instances of deviant behavior, and resilience.

As was appropriate in their youth, they can exercise autonomy through an exchange with authority, rather than being forced to either obey or defy. It should be noted that this style of parenting takes patience and can be very difficult.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/parent.pdf>  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/authoritarian-parenting>  
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24954610/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK568743/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2743505/>, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK568743/>

There are many factors that lead parents to adopt a certain style. Economic opportunity, individual exposure, and culture play large roles in these choices. In cross-cultural research, researchers have found that in many countries, immigrants and minority communities are more likely to adopt strict and authoritarian parenting styles.

This trend is found in Latin immigrant communities in America as well. Researchers have indicated that in less privileged communities, this authoritarian parenting style may be less harmful as it becomes necessary to protect and guide children at a young age. However, considerable research done within Latin communities has shown that among strict family styles, there is variation between the punitive measures used to enforce rules and boundaries.

Within researched communities, there tends to be more boundaries and less room for discussion around rules. The authoritative vs. authoritarian distinction is found among parents who are high in nurturing, affection, responsiveness, emotional expression, and who respond to rule breaking by enforcing the rule unyieldingly, rather than punishing disobedience with coercive measures such as withdrawal of love and violence.

Similar to common parenting style research findings, stern and authoritative parenting, rather than coercive authoritarian parenting was associated with greater school performance, discipline, respect of authority, resilience, lower instances of psychopathology, and greater social functioning. Given the nuance required to balance strictness, warmth, discipline and nurturing, the capability for an adolescent to provide adequate parenting to a sibling becomes a very unrealistic and tall order.<sup>9</sup>

When a child in the system assumes a pseudo-parent role, there are very few deliberate decisions made as it relates to guiding, educating and supporting their sibling. These children often step in to shelter both their sibling and their parents from the darker side of adolescent decision making for fear of upsetting a parent or “getting a sibling” in trouble. This process disrupts the parental hierarchy and can often create an environment of ambiguous rules, inconsistent consequences, and secret keeping for the non-parentified sibling.

Each of these things serve as a risk factor to the development and progression of the disease of addiction. Compound this with a youth raised feeling unsure of themselves, fearful for their loved ones and countless parentified children stand at risk of using substances to cope with these overwhelming feelings. Two of the most common findings in longitudinal studies of parentified

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5386503/#:~:text=Research>  
<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2008-01362-001>

children are (1) reported loss of experience in domains outside their family (e.g. academic performance, social experience) and (2) internalizing symptoms associated with high levels of perfectionism and over-achievement, and a degree of heightened anxiety and environmental monitoring that may have been adaptive as a child.

When research is done within samples of adults who were parentified as children, increased reporting of perceived emotional responsibility for their household and siblings is associated with substance abuse disorders, and depressive disorders.<sup>10</sup>

### **Takeaways**

Tonight's family dinner truly highlights the value of the dinner table including all members of the system. Mom was able to observe the impact the parentified role had on each of her daughters as well as their relationship with one another. These women were able to highlight areas of concern from all sides of the family system.

At a family dinner this structure can express frustrations with "multiple parents," allowing a parent the opportunity to highlight where a parent's role stops and the sibling's begins. The parentified child can share how they experience pressure to be a "pseudo-parent". Most importantly, however, at this family dinner, they were able to share their love and concern with one another.

In fact, at our dinner, the parentified sibling struggled to identify where she found her younger sibling's strengths and was able to realize exactly how much she allowed her fears for her sister to cloud her ability to see the young woman before her.

### **Macro Level Considerations**

This conversation allows for an opportunity to explore the role a "village" can play in supporting family hierarchical structures. The adolescent at the table shared that she felt more at home in her parent's home country of Brazil than here in the US. When she was asked to elaborate, she shared that she missed the connection of her extended family system. In fact, both girls and mom highlighted this as something they missed.

This episode explored how the parental hierarchy is both supported and disrupted by a parentified child. In communities where the support system is readily available, already engaged with the family system and already aligned with the family values, a parent who often through no part of their own are unable to be as available as they wish can reach for the support of a parenting peer. This engagement

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<sup>10</sup> [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J135v05n04\\_03](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J135v05n04_03)  
[https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J135v05n02\\_04?tab=permissions&scroll=top&role=tab](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J135v05n02_04?tab=permissions&scroll=top&role=tab)

with an extended support system, or village as you will, can serve to alleviate any pressure a child may feel to care-take or parent their sibling.

Communities must explore how they support the establishment of supportive “village” communities. The United States military creates programs to support our National Guard in connecting service member families with one another since National Guard members are often living geographically distant from their cohort. Specific programs like summer camps and family programs are scheduled throughout the year to bring these families together.

Parent-Teacher Associations can serve a similar purpose on a more general scale. An area often not explored is the role a workplace can play in creating a sense of community among their employees. Perhaps regular family events in the workplace, parent workshops offered at lunch, early release days, bring your child to work day could all serve as creative ways of encouraging the development of a village.

Embracing a commitment to regularly scheduled family-focused events throughout all facets of American culture: schools, corporations, municipalities and religious organizations could enhance a family’s ability to support their hierarchy and thus, support our youth.

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