

## REVIEW

# Parental burnout: Moving the focus from children to parents

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**Abstract**

Parental burnout (PB)—a condition characterized by intense exhaustion related to parenting, emotional distancing from one's children, and a loss of parental fulfillment—has received increasing attention in recent years, even more since the worldwide COVID-19 crisis and the confinement of parents with their children. This crisis put the spotlight on parents' suffering, and the need to better understand parental burnout and how to best assess and treat it emerged as a priority. This brief article introduces the Thematic Issue of *New Directions in Child and Adolescent Development* focused on the measurement of parental burnout across various regions of the world. It briefly reviews the concept of parental burnout, its phenomenological experience, its etiology and consequences, and its measurement.

**KEYWORDS**

assessment, burnout, cross-cultural, culture, parent, Parental Burnout Assessment, parenting, stress, world

To Taishi Kawamoto<sup>1</sup>

As a result of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, many parents across the world were locked-down at home with their children during weeks. This quarantine constituted a real blessing for some parents who suddenly felt less rushed (fewer trips, less extracurricular activities, less homework to supervise, less mental workload) and had the opportunity to spend more quality time with their children. However, for other parents, especially those who had to work from home while being constantly solicited by their children, the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper and this themed issue is dedicated to our late colleague Taishi Kawamoto who was one of the youngest members of the International Investigation of Parental Burnout (IIPB) consortium and who passed away at age 31. Thank you Kaishi for your contribution to the Consortium and for extending the knowledge about parental burnout.

quarantine was experienced as a very difficult time. The media put the spotlight on these parents, and the interest in parental burnout literally boomed in the public, the professionals, and the media alike. The need to extend the knowledge regarding the assessment, prevention, and treatment of parental burnout emerged as one of the priorities for psychological sciences (Gruber et al., in press). This thematic issue of *New Directions in Child and Adolescent Development* is part of this endeavor and aims to facilitate the assessment of parental burnout across the world.

This spotlight on the suffering of parents during the quarantine certainly is an opportunity for the emerging field of parental burnout, but it might also represent an extraordinary opportunity for the field of developmental psychology as a whole. Indeed, life-span psychology put aside, developmental psychology has long focused essentially on children. For decades, parents have mostly been considered as means to achieve good developmental outcomes in children,<sup>2</sup> which is indeed what countries that have ratified the Convention of the Rights of the Child expect from parents (Daly, 2007). In this perspective, parents have been “instrumentalized” at the service of their children’s development and best interest. Things are however changing and developmental research has begun to examine the parenthood experience in a general sense, without focusing only on parenting skills and styles. Parental mental health is now increasingly considered as an important variable in its own right and not only because of its relevance to child development. Research on parental burnout seems to reconcile both trends: on the one hand, it emphasizes the importance of parental well-being and the risk that parents bear when they are exhausting themselves for their children. And on the other hand, it emphasizes that exhausting oneself for one’s children turns back on children because parental burnout increases child neglect and parental violence (e.g., Mikolajczak, Gross, & Roskam, 2019). This brief article will introduce the concept of parental burnout, its phenomenological experience, its etiology and consequences, and its measurement.

## 1 | WHAT IS PARENTAL BURNOUT? HOW DOES IT FEEL?

Parental burnout is not ordinary parenting stress (Brianda, Roskam & Mikolajczak, 2020; Kawamoto, Furutani, & Alimardani, 2018; Lebert, Dorard, Boujut, & Wendland, 2018). Parenting stress is perfectly common, normal, and even necessary. Parental burnout occurs when parenting stress severely and chronically overwhelms parents’ resources to cope, and manifests through four main symptoms. First, parents feel exhausted and run down by their parenting role. In an attempt to save the little energy they have left (conservation of resource theory; Hobfoll, 1989), exhausted parents then detach themselves emotionally from their children. They do not enjoy being with their children anymore and lose pleasure in parenting to the point that, sometimes, they cannot stand their role as parent anymore. Finally, burned-out parents do not recognize themselves as the parent they used and wanted to be (Hubert & Aujoulat, 2018; Roskam, Brianda, & Mikolajczak, 2018).

The foregoing symptoms can occasionally be experienced by any parent. What makes PB a worrying psychological condition is the number of symptoms, and the frequency with which they are experienced. The number and frequency of burnout symptoms are

<sup>2</sup> See for example “Parental Socialization of Emotion and Self-Regulation: Understanding Processes and Application,” a special issue published in March 2020 in *Developmental Psychology*, one of the best journals in the field. In this special issue, as in most of developmental research, parents’ emotions, cognitions and behaviors were not studied for themselves, but for the interest they represent in child development. The core assumption of all the articles published in this special issue was that parental emotion and emotion regulation are a critical target to promote important aspects of child development (e.g., child adjustment, socioemotional competence, and self-regulation). Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/special/dev-parental-socialization-emotion-self-regulation-pdf>

direct indicators of the severity of burnout, which itself directly predicts its pervasive consequences.

## 2 | WHY DOES PARENTAL BURNOUT MATTER?

Researchers have only recently begun to study the consequences of parental burnout, but their findings already show both the breadth and the seriousness of parental burnout's consequences. As regards the parents themselves, parental burnout give rise to severe suicidal and escape ideations (Mikolajczak et al., 2019), which are much more frequent in parental burnout than in job burnout or even depression (Mikolajczak et al., 2019; 2020). In addition to increasing the desire to physically escape from the parenting situation, parental burnout is also related to psychological forms of escape such as alcohol use (Mikolajczak, Brianda, Avalosse, & Roskam, 2018). At the biological level, parental burnout causes a strong dysregulation in the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis (Brianda et al., 2020; Brianda et al., in press) which is most likely causally involved in the somatic complaints and sleep disorders commonly reported by burned-out parents (Sarrionandia, 2019) and potentially also in the increase in violence against one's children (cortisol seems to fuel anger; Martorell & Bugental, 2006; Moons, Eisenberger, & Taylor, 2010).

Beyond the parents themselves, parental burnout also has consequences for children (du Pouget de Nadaillac, 2018). It strongly and linearly increases the frequency of neglectful and violent behaviors toward one's children (Mikolajczak et al., 2019) and this effect is causal because when parental burnout is treated via a targeted psychological intervention, the frequency of these neglectful or violent behaviors decrease proportionally to the decrease in parental burnout (Brianda, Roskam, Gross et al., in press). In addition to deteriorating the parent–child relationship, parental burnout also affects the couple relationship, notably by increasing conflicts. Parts of these conflicts may stem from the burned-out parent perceiving his/her partner as responsible for his/her situation (due to not sharing parental duties or not offering enough support) or from the burned-out parent off-loading onto their partner a part of the aggressiveness felt toward the children. A network analysis of Mikolajczak et al. (2018)'s data suggested that these conflicts also stem from the partner reacting to the parent's violent or neglectful behaviors toward the children (Blanchard, Roskam, Mikolajczak, & Heeren, in press). Such network analyses of parental burnout symptoms and its consequences are particularly interesting in that they show how consequences contribute to maintain and even increase parental burnout' symptoms, forming over time a dense network of related difficulties that reinforce each other (see Blanchard & Heeren, 2020 for more details about the interest of the network approach in the field of parental burnout).

## 3 | WHO DEVELOPS PARENTAL BURNOUT? RISK FACTORS AND ETIOLOGICAL MECHANISM

Research has shown that a wide range of factors can either slightly or greatly increase the vulnerability to parental burnout (for a review of risk and protective factors and their respective weights, see Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018). Parents are at greater risk when they aim to be perfect parents (Kawamoto et al., 2018; Sorkkila & Aunola, 2020), are neurotic or lack emotion and stress management abilities (Le Vigouroux, Scola, Raes, Mikolajczak, & Roskam, 2017; Lebert et al., 2018), lack emotional or practical support from the co-parent (Lindström, Åman & Norberg, 2011; Mikolajczak, Raes, Avalosse, & Roskam, 2018) or from

the social network more broadly (Séjourné, Sanchez-Rodriguez, Leboulenger, & Callahan, 2018), have poor child-rearing practices (Mikolajczak et al., 2018), have children with special needs that interfere with family life (Gérain & Zech, 2018; Norberg, 2007; Lindström, Åman, & Norberg, 2010), or work part-time or are stay-at-home parents (Lebert et al., 2018; Mehauden & Piraux, 2018).

This being said, not all perfectionist parents are in burnout, neither are all those who lack co-parental or social support nor all those who have a child with special needs. This is because risk factors rarely exist in the absence of resources to compensate for their effect. Most parents have a number of risk factors but they also have a number of resources. For instance, Beth may be a perfectionist stay-at-home mother struggling with a young child with learning difficulties and a difficult adolescent, but she benefits from the support of her husband and her mother, and she has a hobby—painting—that helps her breathe out and take distance from parenting. It is when the balance between risks and resources chronically leans to the wrong side that parental burnout occurs (Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018). Each parental burnout has its own history in the sense that the composition of the balance is peculiar to each parent. However, the underlying etiological mechanism—that is, the imbalance between risks and resources—is common to all burned-out parents.

#### 4 | HOW CAN PARENTAL BURNOUT BE DIAGNOSED OR ASSESSED?

Nothing will ever replace a clinical interview with a psychologist or doctor trained to parental burnout. A diagnosis based on a clinical interview has the advantage of giving the suffering parent a space to express one's distress and be listened to in a warm and non-judgmental way. Yet, formal diagnostic instruments are also necessary. Beyond their usefulness in research and epidemiological studies, they are also useful in practice: First, formal testing may serve as a starting point for an open dialogue with one's family doctor or psychologist. Second, when taken online, formal diagnosis tests can also help parents to put words on their ill-being and act as an incentive to seek professional help.

Two instruments to measure parental burnout have been validated so far. The first, the Parental Burnout Inventory (PBI; Roskam, Raes, & Mikolajczak, 2017), was developed based on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 2010). The PBI suggested that parental burnout encompassed three main symptoms: exhaustion related to one's parental role, emotional distancing from one's children, and loss of parental efficiency. Because the PBI may not fully reflect the experience of burned-out parents, Roskam et al. (2018) used an inductive method to develop another instrument based on testimonies of parents in burn out. Testimonies were first subjected to thematic analysis; items were then developed to represent each theme and then sent to a community sample of more than 900 parents aged from 20 to 59 and coming from both French-speaking (Belgium, France, Switzerland) and English-speaking (e.g., United Kingdom, United States) countries. The factor analysis (invariant across languages) revealed four factors named exhaustion related to one's parental role, emotional distancing from one's children, feelings of being fed up with one's parental role, and contrast with how the parent used and wanted to be. The Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA) was born. It suggests that not all exhausted parents lose efficiency but they do all lose the pleasure of parenting and of being with their children.

The PBA has recently been translated in more than 20 languages<sup>3</sup> in the framework of the International Investigation of Parental Burnout, a study aimed to investigate the

<sup>3</sup> Algerian, Arabic, Spanish, Basque, Chinese, Dutch, English, Finish, French, German, Persia, Italian, Japanese, Urdu, Portuguese, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Swedish, Thai, Turkish, Vietnamese.

prevalence of parental burnout across the world. Comparing the prevalence of parental burnout across countries required to use the same instrument. However, using the same instrument pre-supposed that the symptoms and the structure of parental burnout symptoms are sufficiently equivalent in all countries/cultures. The articles gathered in this thematic issue examined the factor structure and other psychometric properties of the PBA in very different countries/cultures and their findings suggest that, in spite of the huge variation in parenting norms and practices around the world (see e.g., Borstein, 2013; Harkness & Super, 1996, 2002; Keller, 2007), the subjective experience of parenting exhaustion is more or less similar across contexts (Burundi, Cameroon, Rwanda, Togo, see Sodi, Kpassagou, Hatta, Ndayizigiye, Ndayipfukamiye, Tenkué, et al., 2020; Brazil, Portugal, see Matias et al., 2020; Iran, see Mousavi, Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2020; Japan, see Furutani, Kawamoto, Alimardani & Nakashima, 2020; Lebanon, see Gannagé, Besson, Harfouche, Roskam & Mikolajczak, 2020; Poland; see Szczygiel, Sekulowicz, Kwiatkowski, Roskam, & Mikolajczak, 2020; Romania; see Stanculescu, Roskam, Muntean, & Gurza, 2020; Turkey, see Arikan, Üstündağ-Budak, Akgun, Mikolajczak, & Roskam, 2020).

The foregoing finding opens the road for exciting cross-cultural research, such as studies that would compare whether the risk factors and protective factors for parental burnout are the same across countries and, even most importantly, whether their weights are the same. It is indeed possible that the psychological traits of the parents (e.g., perfectionism) weigh more in industrialized countries, and that sociodemographic factors (e.g., number and spacing of children) weigh more in developing countries. Besides antecedents, it is also possible that the consequences of PB differ across countries, with more neglect in some countries, more physical violence in others, and more escape ideations in still others. Thus, while the instrument to measure parental burnout may be universal, this does not mean that its correlates are the same all around the world, nor that the ways to prevent and treat it are similar. These might clearly be more culture specific, especially if risk factors differ across countries or cultures. It is our hope that this thematic issue will stimulate such research and many others.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

#### DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors of this paper have now founded a training institute which delivers training on parental burnout to professionals. The institute did not participate in the funding of this paper nor did it influence the writing process, the results reported or their interpretation in any manner.

#### PROTECTION OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

This is not applicable to this article as it is not an empirical study.

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