

**Child-Oriented Perfectionism and Parental Burnout: The Moderating Role of Parents'
Emotional Intelligence**

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Author Contribution

D.S. and G.-X.L. contributed equally to the whole manuscript preparation. K.P. provided critical revision on the first draft of the manuscript.

Protections of Research Participants

The study was conducted in accordance with the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Sopot WKE/S/18/III/115.

Open Practices Statement

This study was not formally preregistered. The database of study variables has been made available on a permanent third-party archive, Open Science Framework:

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Declaration of Conflict of Interest

N/A.

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Abstract

Is it possible that striving for flawlessness and perfection in their children's performance is detrimental to parents? Could it be so harmful that it exposes parents to the risk of burnout?

In order to answer these questions, this study adopted a three-dimension model of child-oriented perfectionism (encompassing three dimensions: high standards, order, and discrepancy) and examined the association of these dimensions with parental burnout. The participants were 325 Polish parents (78.8% mothers) who lived in the same household with at least one child aged 3 to 19 years. The results showed that discrepancy—parents' perception that their children failed to meet their standards and expectations—was a crucial dimension of child-oriented perfectionism that put parents at risk of burnout; however, parents' emotional intelligence mitigated such harmful effects. The study contributes to knowledge about the antecedents of parental burnout and provides insight into possible interventions to counter the risk of striving as parents for perfect children.

Keywords: parental burnout, other-oriented perfectionism, child-oriented perfectionism, discrepancy, emotional competence.

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1. Introduction

It is hard to deny that perfectionism has become the zeitgeist in recent decades (Curran & Hill, 2019; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Smith et al., 2021). People nowadays set excessively high standards and engage in overly critical self-evaluation in almost every aspect of their lives. The pursuit of flawlessness and perfection even extends to such a private sphere of life as parenting. Some parents set high standards for themselves in striving for perfect childcare practices (Snell et al., 2005); others focus on their children and expect perfection in their performance (Mitchelson & Burns, 1998; Piotrowski, 2020). Earlier research has shown that striving to be the best parent elevates parental stress and puts parents at risk of burnout (Kawamoto et al., 2018; Lin, Szczygieł, et al., 2021; Lin & Szczygieł, 2022b; Sorkkila & Aunola, 2020). What is not known is whether striving to have the best possible child places parents under excessive strain, leading to burnout. The present study addresses this issue and explores the relations between child-oriented perfectionism and parental burnout.

1.1 Parental Burnout

Parental burnout is an affective syndrome in which parents experience overwhelming exhaustion related to their parental role, emotional distancing from their children, a loss of

parental fulfillment, and a perceived contrast between they used to feel in the past and how they feel about parenting today (Roskam et al., 2018). This syndrome has been described as one of the most worrying public health concerns in recent decades (Gruber et al., 2020; Mikolajczak et al., 2021). There are good reasons why parental burnout deserves so much attention. First, it leads to harmful consequences: Parental burnout endangers not only parents' health (e.g., suicidal ideation; Mikolajczak et al., 2019) but also that of their children (e.g., depression; Yang et al., 2021). Second, parental burnout is highly prevalent globally; on average, 5% of parents currently suffer from this syndrome (and as high as 9% in Western countries; Roskam et al., 2021). Given the dangerous consequences and high prevalence of this syndrome, there is an urgent need to extend knowledge about the etiological factors of parental burnout to prevent its development.

1.2 Child-Oriented Perfectionism as a Risk Factor for Parental Burnout

Of all the etiological factors studied, parents' ability to manage their emotions, personality traits, values, beliefs, etc. appear relevant (e.g., Le Vigouroux et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2022; Lin, Roskam, et al., 2021; Vertsberger et al., 2022; for a full review; see Mikolajczak et al., 2018, 2021; Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018). For instance, a recent study showed that parents are more susceptible to burnout when they prioritize power and achievement values and are less interested in prosocial goals and serving others (Lin & Szczygieł, 2022a). According to previous research, such tendencies characterize

perfectionists (Zacharopoulos et al., 2021). Bearing this in mind, it is no wonder that parenting perfectionism—the pursuit of perfect childcare practices (Snell et al., 2005)—has been identified as a notable etiological factor in parental burnout (Kawamoto et al., 2018; Lin, Szczygieł, et al., 2021; Lin & Szczygieł, 2022b; Sorkkila & Aunola, 2020). However, parenting takes place in a complex relational context involving both parents and children. Thus, parents who strive for excellence may expect perfection not only from themselves (i.e., parenting perfectionism), but also from their children (i.e., child-oriented perfectionism; Piotrowski, 2020).

Like parenting perfectionism, child-oriented perfectionism can be destructive to parents as it exposes them to great effort, disappointment, and emotional distress (Piotrowski, 2020). First, it requires parents to set high standards and goals and constantly monitor progress (Kleszewski & Otto, 2020; Stoeber, 2015). Second, such efforts are usually exhausting. Parents need to communicate with their children and persuade them to comply with parental standards (see Stoeber, 2015), involving repeated negotiations (see Kleszewski & Otto, 2020) and generating conflicts with their children (Barber et al., 2012; Smetana & Rote, 2019). Finally, if the children have not met their expectations, disappointed perfectionist parents may attribute the children's failure to their own incompetence (see Mitchelson & Burns, 1998). As a result, parents may experience decreased self-confidence (see Hubert & Aujoulat, 2018). Altogether, when such exhausting struggles and negative self-evaluation are experienced

continuously or to a significant degree, they accumulate and become a significant source of parenting stress (Crnic & Low, 2002).

Child-oriented perfectionism is a multidimensional concept that encompasses three dimensions: high standards (i.e., setting high expectations for children and expecting them to be perfect), order (i.e., expecting children to be well organized and tidy), and discrepancy (i.e., the perception that the child does not meet the standards set by the parent; Piotrowski, 2020). Earlier studies found that child-oriented perfectionism dimensions differed in their effects on parenting stress: While high standards and order were insignificantly linked with parenting stress, discrepancy was significantly positively associated with parenting stress. This implies that discrepancy may be key factor in child-oriented perfectionism that drives parents into burnout. This is not surprising, as perceiving the discrepancy between parental expectations and children's actual achievements is likely to trigger constant emotional distress (Smith et al., 2020), including dissatisfaction and disappointment at not having an ideal child (Piotrowski, 2020). When people do not have sufficient help to mitigate harm and experience chronic negative emotions in this way, they become stressed and exhausted (Pama et al., 2018).

1.3 Emotional Intelligence as a Protective Factor for Parental Burnout

According to the Balance between Risks and Resources (BR²) theory of parental

burnout, parental burnout is not the product of a single personality trait, such as the perfectionism under consideration here, but results from a chronic imbalance between risk and protective factors in the parental domain (Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018). Protective factors can thus be assumed to compensate for the harm caused by risk factors, provided that these factors have the same weight as the risk factors. Among the protective factors with the potential to compensate in this way, parents' emotional intelligence—individual differences in how people functionally identify, express, understand, regulate and use their own and others' emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Petrides et al., 2016)—merits our attention. Earlier studies have shown that emotional intelligence buffers the positive association between parenting perfectionism and parental burnout in different cultural settings (Lin, Szczygieł, et al., 2021), and that emotional intelligence mitigates the detrimental effects of maladaptive emotion regulation stemming from parenting perfectionism (Lin & Szczygieł, 2022b). Such evidence highlights the possibility that parents' emotional intelligence could be strong enough to offset the emotional costs of discrepancy.

1.4 The Present Study

Building upon the BR² and the abovementioned findings, we expected a positive relation between the discrepancy dimension of child-oriented perfectionism and parental burnout (Hypothesis 1). We also predicted that emotional intelligence would be found to buffer this adverse effect of discrepancy (Hypothesis 2) and expected the relation between discrepancy

and parental burnout to be stronger for parents low in emotional intelligence (vs. those high in emotional intelligence). We also decided to explore whether child-oriented perfectionism's high standards and order dimensions predict parental burnout and whether parents' emotional intelligence moderates these relationships.

2. Method

2.1 Participants and Procedure

Data were collected from a sample of 325 Polish parents ($M_{age} = 38.9$ years, $SD_{age} = 5.98$ years; 78.8% mothers) who lived in the same household with at least one child. The number of children in the participating families ranged from 1 to 5 ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 0.88$). The parents' youngest child (or only child) was aged 3 to 19 years ($M_{age} = 8.42$ years, $SD_{age} = 5.06$ years). The participants reported spending on average of 7 hours per day ($M = 7.11$, $SD = 4.46$) in direct contact with their child(ren), excluding bedtime and simply sharing the same household. Among the participants, 2.2% were educated to primary level, 19.4% were educated to secondary level, 26.8% had an undergraduate degree, and 51.7% had a university degree. Regarding their employment status, 73.2% had a paid professional activity. As regards their family type, 80.6% were raising their child/children with the father/mother of the child(ren), 8.0% were single parents, 5.8% were in a blended family, and 2.6% were raising children in a multi-generational household.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Child-Oriented Perfectionism

Child-oriented perfectionism was measured with the Children Dyadic Almost Perfect Scale (C-DAPS, Piotrowski, 2020). The C-DAPS is 23-item questionnaire consisting of three subscales: high standards (6 items, e.g. “I have a strong need for my child/ren to strive for excellence”), order (4 items, e.g. “I think my child/ren should be organized”), and discrepancy (13 items, e.g. “My children/child often do(es) not measure up to my expectations”). Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale: from *completely disagree* (1) to *completely agree* (7). Scale scores were calculated by averaging the responses to the items associated with each child-oriented perfectionism dimension.

2.2.2 Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence was measured with the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form (TEIQue-SF, Petrides, 2009; Polish version by Szczygieł et al., 2015). This is a 30-item questionnaire (e.g., “Expressing my emotions with words is not a problem for me”). Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale: from *completely disagree* (1) to *completely agree* (7). Scale scores were calculated by averaging the responses to the items after appropriate items had been reversed.

2.2.3 Parental Burnout

Parental burnout was assessed with the Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA, Roskam et al., 2018; Polish version by Szczygieł et al., 2020), a 23-item questionnaire assessing the four core symptoms of parental burnout: emotional exhaustion (9 items; e.g., “I feel completely run down by my role as a parent”), contrast with previous parental self (6 items; e.g., “I tell myself I’m no longer the parent I used to be”), feelings of being fed up (i.e., loss of pleasure in one’s parental role; 5 items; e.g., “I don’t enjoy being with my children”), and emotional distancing from one’s children (3 items; e.g., “I am no longer able to show my children that I love them”). PBA items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale from *never* (0) to *every day* (6). The total score was computed by summing the item scores so that higher scores indicated greater burnout.

3. Results

We tested our hypotheses with correlation and hierarchical regression analyses using SPSS 25. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations among study variables are presented in Table 1. In the regression analyses, the three child-oriented perfectionism scales were entered simultaneously as a potential predictor of parental burnout in the first step; emotional intelligence was entered in the second step; and the two-way multiplicative terms between emotional intelligence and the three child-oriented perfectionism scales were then entered simultaneously in the third step. These predictor variables were mean-centered before interaction terms were created, in order to avoid multi-collinearity. The regression results are

summarized in Table 2.

Regarding child-oriented perfectionism's main effects, a positive association of discrepancy with parental burnout emerged, confirming Hypothesis 1 (see Table 1 and Regression Model A in Table 2). In addition, although there was no significant correlation between high standards and parental burnout (see Table 1), high standards negatively predicted parental burnout when the effects of the other two child-oriented perfectionism scales were taken into account (see Regression Model A in Table 2). This may be due to the elimination of the suppression effect of high standards by controlling for their shared variance with discrepancy (see MacKinnon et al., 2000). There was a clear relation between emotional intelligence and parental burnout (see Table 1), and such an effect remained significant even when the child-oriented perfectionism scales were controlled for (see Regression Model B in Table 2).

The model including the predictors, moderator, and interaction terms (Regression Model C) fitted the data better ($\Delta R^2 = .04, p = .000$) than the model with only the predictors and moderator (Regression Model B). In particular, the interaction term of discrepancy and emotional intelligence was significant in predicting parental burnout (see Regression Model C in Table 2). Simple slope tests (with the interaction plot presented in Figure 1) were then performed and revealed that the positive predictive effects of discrepancy decreased as

emotional intelligence increased from low ($\beta = .54, b = 14.69, SE = 1.65, p = .000$) to high ($\beta = .16, b = 4.40, SE = 1.89, p = .021$). This finding confirmed the buffering effect of emotional intelligence, thus supporting Hypothesis 2.

4. Discussion

This study is the first in the parental burnout literature to include the aspect of perfectionism directed at one's children (i.e., child-oriented perfectionism) as an etiological factor for parental burnout. In line with our expectations, the results demonstrated that discrepancy—the perception that a child fails to meet the high standards that a parent has set for them—is a crucial dimension of child-oriented perfectionism that puts parents at risk of parental burnout. Moreover, the negative association of high standards with parental burnout shows that it is not setting high expectations for the child that jeopardizes parents, but rather the perception that the child is not meeting those standards. This finding is consistent with those from studies on expecting excellence in a romantic partner (e.g., Shea et al., 2006).

Our study goes a step further by showing that parents' emotional intelligence mitigates such adverse effects of discrepancy: Parents who reported higher discrepancy had more symptoms of parental burnout, but this relation was more salient among low emotional intelligence parents. This finding corroborates prior studies showing that emotional intelligence is a strong positive predictor of well-being and mental health (Petrides et al.,

2016). However, it should also be noted that emotional intelligence only partially cancels out the adverse effects of child-oriented perfectionism on parental burnout. This may be because parents who demand perfection from their children need to manage their own and their children's emotions; future researchers may consider examining the role of interpersonal emotional intelligence and emotion regulation strategies in the child-oriented perfectionism-parental burnout association.

Our research suggests the importance of situating people's pursuit of perfection in others in context. The picture that emerged from previous studies of the consequences of other-oriented perfectionism was inconsistent. Although some studies showed its beneficial effect (e.g., higher well-being, Birch et al., 2019; lower job burnout, Childs & Stoeber, 2010), other studies found that it was neither adaptive nor damaging (Stoeber & Corr, 2016). Together with previous findings (Mitchelson & Burns, 1998; Piotrowski, 2020), our study indicates that the consequences of other-oriented perfectionism for a parent are wholly deleterious when the target is children (i.e., child-oriented perfectionism) who fail to meet expectations. One of the reasons why child-oriented perfectionism is detrimental may be the ubiquity of intensive norms in modern parenting—ideal parents should be warm, supportive, and not the opposite (see Faircloth, 2014; Lin, Hansotte, et al., 2021)—that contradict what child-oriented perfectionism drives parents to do (e.g., argue and negotiate with children about expectations; Barber et al., 2012; Smetana & Rote, 2019). This contradiction places a burden

on perfectionistic parents; as it unfolds, it would not be surprising if parents with higher child-oriented perfectionism become exhausted. However, future studies are needed to validate these predictions.

These findings also have practical implications. One might expect that the best way to avoid the negative consequences of child-oriented perfectionism is to directly draw parents' attention to its adverse effects and convince parents to stop comparing their own children with an unrealistic image of an ideal child or setting unrealistic expectations for their children. This seems obvious, but it is often challenging to change parents' attitudes. Our study suggests another solution: Given the buffering effect of emotional intelligence shown in our study, we believe that the risk of parental burnout due to child-oriented perfectionism can be minimized if parents enhance their emotional intelligence. In other words, it could be fruitful and helpful for practitioners to provide parents who exhibit higher child-oriented perfectionism with psychological help aimed at improving their emotional intelligence as parents, including skills such as identifying, understanding, regulating and using emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). We find cause for optimism in recent findings showing that emotional intelligence training is effective even when it is as short as just four two-and-a-half-hour group training sessions (Kotsou et al., 2019). What is needed now, however, is experimental or treatment research.

Before concluding this article, at least three limitations of the current study should be acknowledged. The first limitation lies in the sample: Most respondents were mothers. It is therefore unclear whether our findings are equally relevant to fathers. However, as shown in the complementary analyses (see S1. Complementary Analyses in Online Supplemental Material), when parents' gender and its interaction with all predictors and with the moderator in the analyses are included, our main results remain similar, suggesting little (if any) possibility that our results may differ according to parents' gender. Second, our data relied exclusively on self-report instruments, which could lead to concerns about common method variance. Future researchers might consider using diaries and quasi-experimental research projects to address this issue. Third, the study used a cross-sectional design that precludes making causality claims. Future longitudinal studies might clarify the reciprocal nature of the relationships examined here. Despite the limitations mentioned above, we believe that our study deserves attention as it extends knowledge about the determinants of parental burnout, provides inspiration for new research, and puts forward practical implications.

5. Conclusion

This is the first empirical study to explore the relations between child-oriented perfectionism and parental burnout. The results show that child-oriented perfectionism, specifically its discrepancy dimension—parents' perception that their child is not meeting their standards—puts parents at risk of burnout. However, this adverse effect of child-

oriented perfectionism may be mitigated by higher levels of emotional intelligence in parents.

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Table 1*The Cronbach's α s, Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	1	2	3	4
1. Parental burnout	29.32	27.02	.97				
2. High Standards	3.32	1.18	.86	0.07			
3. Order	5.12	1.12	.84	0.10	0.38***		
4. Discrepancy	2.25	0.86	.92	0.48***	0.44***	0.30***	
5. Emotional intelligence	4.94	0.90	.90	-0.53***	-0.01	-0.12*	-0.32***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2

The Summary of Multiple Regressions

Variables	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI of <i>b</i>	
						<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Regression Model A (Predictors Enrolled)							
High Standards	-0.17	-4.61	1.52	-3.04	.003	-7.59	-1.63
Order	0.00	0.07	1.43	0.05	.961	-2.74	2.88
Discrepancy	0.55	14.94	1.47	10.18	.000	12.05	17.82
F(3, 321) = 36.22***; R ² = .25; adjusted R ² = .25							
Variables	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI of <i>b</i>	
						<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Regression Model B (Moderator Enrolled)							
High Standards	-0.10	-2.62	1.39	-1.89	.060	-5.34	0.11
Order	-0.03	-0.71	1.29	-0.55	.582	-3.25	1.83
Discrepancy	0.40	10.78	1.41	7.66	.000	8.01	13.55
Emotional Intelligence	-0.40	-10.87	1.26	-8.62	.000	-13.35	-8.39
F(4, 320) = 51.96***; R ² = .39; adjusted R ² = .39							
Variables	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI of <i>b</i>	
						<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Regression Model C (Interaction Terms Enrolled)							
High Standards	-0.09	-2.46	1.35	-1.82	.069	-5.12	0.19
Order	-0.04	-0.98	1.28	-0.77	.444	-3.49	1.53
Discrepancy	0.35	9.55	1.40	6.83	.000	6.79	12.30
Emotional Intelligence	-0.38	-10.33	1.24	-8.33	.000	-12.77	-7.89
Emotional Intelligence × High Standards	0.09	2.22	1.23	1.81	.071	-0.19	4.63
Emotional Intelligence × Order	-0.03	-0.78	1.24	-0.63	.531	-3.22	1.66
Emotional Intelligence × Discrepancy	-0.23	-5.15	1.09	-4.72	.000	-7.30	-3.00
F(7, 317) = 35.22***; R ² = .44; adjusted R ² = .42							

Figure 1

Interaction Plot

