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Parentification in Children Aged 5–6 Years and Its Impact on Free Play and Exploration: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Background: Parentification, in which children take on adult instrumental or emotional responsibilities, has mostly been studied in adolescents and adults; its consequences for young children's play and exploration remain unclear.

Methods: Following PRISMA 2020, Scopus and Google Scholar were searched (2018–2025); 10 of 93 records were analysed by thematic synthesis.

Results: Parentification lies on a continuum: age-appropriate tasks supported independence and empathy, whereas intense or emotional demands were linked to psychological strain and lost childhood experiences. No empirical study measured it directly at age 5–6.

Novelty: Unlike previous reviews, this study links parentification with young children's right to play, identifying concrete forms at age 5–6 and proposing a model of how they displace free play and exploration.

Conclusion: Excessive parentification likely reduces both the time and quality of play; direct empirical studies with young children are needed.

KEYWORDS

parentification; early childhood; free play; exploration; role reversal.

Introduction

Children aged 5–6 years are highly curious and learn primarily through play and active exploration of their surroundings. Play supports cognitive, social, emotional, and language development as well as problem solving, and it allows children to construct knowledge, develop creativity, and understand their environment (Yogman et al. 2018). Freedom to play and explore is therefore both a developmental need and a right of young children.

Within families, one condition that may restrict this freedom is parentification, in which children take on roles, responsibilities, or functions that normally belong to adults (Jurkovic 1997). Parentification may be instrumental, such as household chores and caring for siblings, or emotional, such as serving as a parent's source of psychological support. When responsibilities exceed a child's developmental capacity, they can cause emotional strain and deprive the child of age-appropriate activities (Burton 2007). Recent studies link childhood parentification with conflicting emotions and premature responsibility (Schorr and Goldner 2023), with internalising problems and lower well-being in young adulthood (Nair et al. 2025), and with the loss of childhood experiences (Keny and Banerjee 2026).

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Not all parentification is harmful. Responsibilities that are proportionate to a child's development can foster independence, empathy, and social responsibility (Masiran et al. 2023; Berkes and Pikó 2025). However, when demands exceed the child's capacity, parentification may crowd out basic developmental needs, including the need to play and explore.

Research on parentification has concentrated on adolescents and young adults. In Indonesia, studies are dominated by discussions of family dynamics and parenting, and in many communities assigning responsibilities to young children is regarded as character building, so excessive demands may go unrecognised. No previous review has examined parentification, free play, and exploration together in children aged 5–6 years from an early childhood perspective centred on the right to play.

This systematic literature review therefore aims to (1) identify forms of parentification relevant to children aged 5–6 years, (2) examine their impact on free play and exploration, and (3) analyse the contextual factors that shape this relationship. Its contribution lies in integrating the literature on parentification with early childhood theories of play and exploration, providing a basis for parents, teachers, and policymakers to protect young children's right to play.

Methods

This study used a systematic literature review (Snyder 2019) reported in accordance with PRISMA 2020 (Page et al. 2021).

Data Sources and Search Strategy

Data were retrieved from Scopus and Google Scholar to broaden coverage and reduce search bias. The keywords "parentification", "early childhood education", "preschool", and "exploration" were combined with Boolean operators (AND/OR). The search was limited to articles published between 2018 and 2025, in line with the eligibility criteria in Table 1.

Eligibility Criteria

Both empirical studies and literature-based secondary studies were eligible. Secondary studies were included because empirical research focusing specifically on parentification in children aged 5–6 years is still very limited, so synthesising them was necessary to map the available evidence.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication period	Published 2018–2025	Published before 2018
Source	Journal indexed in SINTA or Scopus	Non-journal sources: proceedings, books, theses, and dissertations
Topic	Parentification, play, exploration, or early childhood development	Not related to the study variables
Study type	Empirical (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods) or literature-based secondary study (review or meta-analysis)	Opinion pieces, editorials, and commentaries
Access	Full text available	Full text not available

Study Selection and Quality Appraisal

Selection followed the PRISMA stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Figure 1). The search yielded 93 records. During title and abstract screening, 69 records were excluded as duplicates or as not addressing parentification, play, or exploration in the context of child development, leaving 24 articles for full-text review. Of these, 14 were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria in terms of focus, publication type, or full-text availability, resulting in 10 included

studies. Quality appraisal considered the clarity of the research aims, the appropriateness of the methods, and the completeness and transparency of reporting; all ten studies were judged adequate.

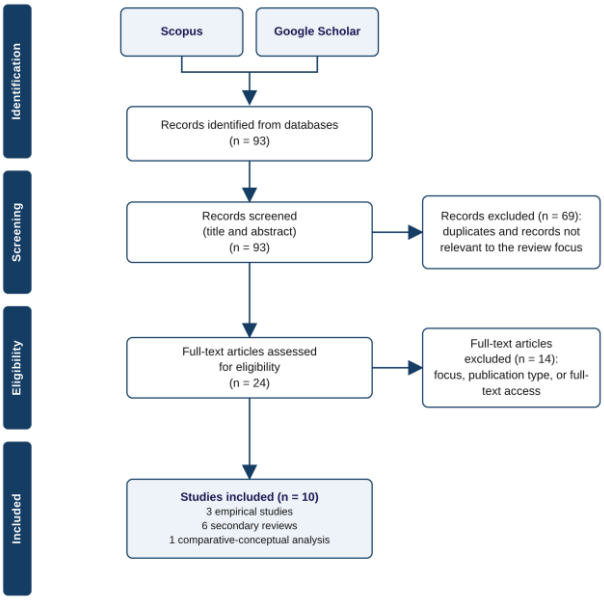


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of study selection

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic synthesis (Thomas and Harden 2008). Findings from each study were extracted, coded, and compared to identify similarities and differences, and then grouped into three themes: forms of parentification in early childhood, its impact on free play and exploration, and the contextual factors that shape this relationship.

Results

Characteristics of the Included Studies

The ten studies comprised three empirical studies, six secondary studies, and one comparative-conceptual analysis (Table 2). The empirical studies were a quantitative study of retrospective parentification, sibling relationships, and self-esteem (Borchet et al. 2020), a qualitative study that developed a model of the emotional experience of parentification (Schorr and Goldner 2023), and a scale-development study of role reversal in young adults (Nair et al. 2025). The secondary studies included a literature review (Borchet, Lewandowska-Walter, and Rostowska 2018), three scoping reviews (De Leeuw and Malcolm-Smith 2023; Stanić, Branica, and Bulat 2025; Berkes and Pikó 2025), an integrative review (Masiran et al. 2023), and a three-level meta-analysis (Zhang, Huang, and Liu 2023). Eight studies addressed parentification directly, whereas two (Aljabreen 2020; De Leeuw and Malcolm-Smith 2023) provided evidence on play, exploration, and protective factors.

Table 2. Characteristics and key findings of the included studies (n = 10)

No	Study	Design	Key findings
1	Borchet et al. (2020)	Quantitative; retrospective, young adults	Childhood parentification was related to sibling relationship quality and self-esteem; sibling support buffered its negative effects.
2	Schorr and Goldner (2023)	Qualitative; theoretical model	Parentified children experienced inner conflict, psychological strain, excessive responsibility, and a lost childhood.
3	Aljabreen (2020)	Comparative-conceptual analysis	Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia all place exploration, creativity, autonomy, and play at the core of learning.

No	Study	Design	Key findings
4	Nair et al. (2025)	Quantitative; scale development, young adults	Childhood role reversal and disorganisation were related to internalising problems and lower well-being in young adulthood.
5	Stanić, Branica, and Bulat (2025)	Scoping review	Parentification is measured in diverse ways, with no universal agreement on its indicators.
6	Masiran et al. (2023)	Integrative review	Parentification has two sides: independence, empathy, and interpersonal competence versus distress, anxiety, and lost childhood.
7	Berkes and Pikó (2025)	Scoping review	Parentification is a "double-edged sword" but is more often linked with stress, anxiety, depression, and exhaustion.
8	Zhang, Huang, and Liu (2023)	Three-level meta-analysis	Parentification was significantly associated with depression, anxiety, and poorer psychological well-being.
9	De Leeuw and Malcolm-Smith (2023)	Scoping review	Positive adult relationships, supportive schools, and opportunities to play enhance children's resilience.
10	Borchet, Lewandowska-Walter, and Rostowska (2018)	Literature review	Childhood parentification affects the completion of developmental tasks in emerging adulthood, positively or negatively.

Convergence, Contradiction, and Moderating Factors

Comparison across studies revealed three patterns. First, the studies converged in showing that intense and prolonged parentification is associated with psychological distress, internalising problems, and the loss of childhood experiences (Schorr and Goldner 2023; Zhang, Huang, and Liu 2023; Nair et al. 2025). Second, apparently contradictory findings linked parentification with independence, empathy, and interpersonal competence (Borchet, Lewandowska-Walter, and Rostowska 2018; Masiran et al. 2023; Berkes and Pikó 2025). Third, these differences can be explained by moderating factors: the type of responsibility (instrumental or emotional), its intensity and duration, whether adults recognise and support the child, and the availability of sibling and school support (Borchet et al. 2020; De Leeuw and Malcolm-Smith 2023). In addition, the variety of definitions and measurement instruments (Stanić, Branica, and Bulat 2025) makes the studies difficult to compare directly.

A further key finding is that none of the empirical studies measured parentification directly in children aged 5–6 years; all three relied on adult participants reporting their childhood experiences retrospectively. The link between parentification and young children's play and exploration discussed below is therefore an inferential synthesis that integrates evidence on parentification with early childhood developmental theory.

Discussion

Parentification as a Developmental Continuum

The synthesis indicates that parentification lies on a continuum between adaptive and destructive forms (Jurkovic 1997). This pattern is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development: responsibilities within the child's reach and scaffolded by an adult, such as tidying toys or preparing a school bag together with a parent, foster independence, whereas demands beyond that zone without support become a burden.

Concrete Forms of Parentification at Age 5–6

At age 5–6, parentification rarely appears as full substitution for a parent. Instead, it takes the form of everyday tasks and demands that gradually shift the child from being cared for to caring for others (Table 3). Instrumental parentification may involve minding an infant or toddler sibling while the mother cooks, works, or sells goods; carrying, feeding, or soothing a crying sibling; watching a sibling so that he

or she does not fall or wander off; and doing routine chores or running errands alone. Such situations are more likely in families facing economic strain, long working hours, single parenthood, or a parent working far from home (Burton 2007).

Emotional parentification is usually less visible, but several reviews suggest that it carries greater risk than instrumental parentification (Masiran et al. 2023; Berkes and Pikó 2025). It includes listening to a parent's complaints about marital conflict or divorce, being asked to take sides, carrying messages between conflicting parents, or feeling obliged to comfort a sad or crying parent. Children's caregiving responses to interparental conflict have been identified as an early form of parentification (Nuttall et al. 2021). In collectivist cultures, such responsibilities are often framed as filial devotion and maturity, which makes them hard to recognise as a burden (Cho et al. 2025).

Table 3. Concrete forms of parentification at age 5–6 and their implications for play and exploration

Form	Concrete example at age 5–6	Implication for play and exploration	Theoretical lens
Instrumental: sibling care	Minding an infant sibling after school; feeding or soothing a crying baby	Afternoon free play displaced; play confined near home and repeatedly interrupted	Play as a developmental right (Yogman et al. 2018)
Instrumental: household tasks	Washing dishes, sweeping, running errands alone	Less time and energy for peer and outdoor play	Zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978)
Emotional: confidant	Listening to complaints about marital conflict or divorce	Worry reduces absorption in pretend and exploratory play	Secure base (Bowlby 1988)
Emotional: mediator or comforter	Carrying messages between parents; comforting a crying parent	Vigilance near the parent; fewer new activities and less exploration	Role reversal (Nuttall et al. 2021)

Impact on Free Play

For kindergarten children who come home at midday, the afternoon hours normally spent playing with peers outdoors may be fully occupied by minding a sibling. Even when the child does play, the play becomes fragmented: the child must stay near the sibling, is frequently interrupted, and cannot leave home to join a play group. Developmentally, this loss has specific consequences. In the preoperational stage, children build knowledge and symbolic representation through pretend and constructive play (Piaget 1962), and at 5–6 years they typically engage in associative and cooperative play with peers (Parten 1932). A child confined to solitary or parallel play at home misses opportunities to negotiate, share roles, and resolve conflicts with peers. Because play also helps children regulate emotions and cope with stress (Yogman et al. 2018), parentified children lose a natural means of recovering from the pressures they face. This runs counter to developmentally appropriate practice, which treats play as an essential need and a primary means of learning (NAEYC 2020).

Impact on Exploration

Attachment theory explains why parentification may also reduce exploration. Children explore confidently when a caregiver serves as a secure base to which they can return when facing something new or threatening (Bowlby 1988). In emotional parentification, the direction of care is reversed: the parent seeks security from the child, so the child loses that secure base and tends to remain vigilant near the parent rather than exploring. Yet exploratory play is a primary means by which young children test hypotheses, gather information, and build an understanding of the world (Pelz and Kidd 2020). A child who is worried about leaving a distressed mother, or who must constantly watch a sibling, is less likely to try new games, ask questions, take objects apart and reassemble them, or explore beyond the home. Figure 2 summarises these mechanisms together with the protective and risk factors that moderate them.

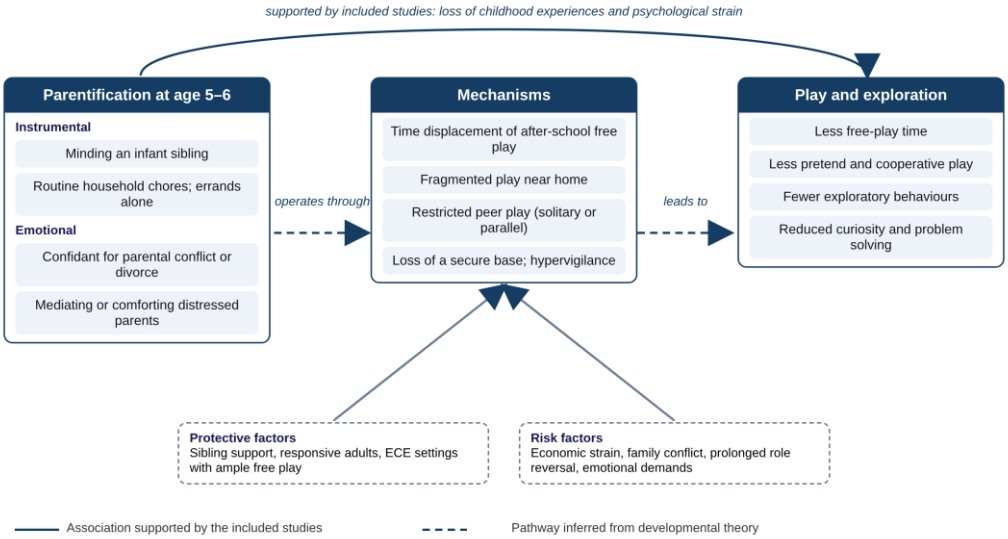


Figure 2. Conceptual model of how parentification may affect free play and exploration in children aged 5–6 years

Implications for Early Childhood Education

Teachers can recognise signs of parentification through daily observation, such as a child who must go home early to mind a sibling, appears tired in class, refuses to play out of worry about a parent, or rarely engages in pretend play. Such signs can be followed up through home visits and parenting programmes that help parents distinguish age-appropriate responsibilities, such as tidying toys or helping with light chores alongside an adult, from responsibilities that exceed the child's capacity, such as minding a baby alone or listening to marital problems. At school, adequate time for free play and high-quality teacher interactions (Morales-Murillo et al. 2020) can provide a compensatory space for children whose play is limited at home, and responsive early childhood settings can act as a protective factor (De Leeuw and Malcolm-Smith 2023).

Limitations

This review has several limitations. The search covered only two databases and excluded grey literature, so publication bias is possible. The number of eligible studies was small, and most were secondary studies. The empirical studies involved adults reporting retrospectively rather than children aged 5–6 years, so the link with play and exploration remains inferential. Finally, no study from Indonesia met the inclusion criteria, so the findings should be applied to the local cultural context with caution.

Conclusion

Proportionate, scaffolded responsibilities may support independence, responsibility, empathy, and social competence, whereas excessive or emotional parentification is likely to reduce both the time and the quality of free play and exploration and to increase emotional strain. At this age, parentification appears mainly as minding an infant sibling and doing household chores, and as serving as a confidant for parental conflict. Its effects depend on family context, parenting, educational settings, and social support. Empirical studies that directly involve children aged 5–6 years, using observation, time diaries, and interviews with parents and teachers, are needed to test this synthesis.

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