



**“There are years that ask questions and years that answer.”**

— Zora Neale Hurston

Have you ever gotten to the point in your healing journey where you can finally admit the emotional and psychological needs you want, but as you ponder how it can be done, you realize the relationship dynamics in place are stubborn blockages to a healthier relationship?

I've been there and still am navigating it, especially with old friends and family who have known me for a long time.

**And no, it's not all in your head.**

Parentification is when there is a parent-child role reversal, where the child takes care of the parent's needs. And as you can guess or know already, it is much more prevalent in minority groups, even normalized.

(source: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2201&context=etd>)

This term was first coined by Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark in 1973:

*“Parentification happens in every part of the world, in every culture, every society, except that its effects may be different depending on what the cultural norm of that society may be. In some cultures like that of some Asian, Mexican, or even African American, since there is more focus on familial interdependency and responsibility rather than individual autonomy, some level of parentification may be beneficial. It could lead to resilience, a sense of social responsibility, and more caretaking skills in children who are being Parentified, especially if it happens in the later years of childhood. Episodic parentification has also been found to be a boost to children's self-esteem from such cultural backgrounds. (Tamar Y. Khafi, Tuppett M. Yates, and Suniya S. Luthar)”*

(source: <https://www.drnajmunriyaz.com/valentines-day-the-fantasies-and-the-realities-xbgttd/>)

Often, parentification can lean towards being more extreme and detrimentally so. This is a lot of the work I am doing with my clients who are children of immigrants and struggle with the effects of caregiving too soon and having boundaries disrupted that a healthy parent-child relationship would have.

I've written a post about the dynamics of being “good and bad” in the Asian diaspora or as children of immigrants; let's break down the logic we have absorbed from this type of upbringing:

- Children who behave well don't inconvenience their parents.
- The love of parents goes to well-behaved children.
- If I inconvenience my parents, I will not be worthy of their love.

**That means to be respectful and be “good” means to undermine our own needs and preferences for those of our parents. Respectful and academically excellent kids are deemed the best, but they are otherwise invisible.**

You end up being the source of calm for your parents, and no matter how well you fulfill that role, that is a huge burden and pressure to someone still growing up and figuring out new things independently.

Some behaviors that we may have done in this role reversal:

- Refusing to ask parents for money or rely on them financially in any big or small way
- Asking friends for rides even though parents are available to do it
- Keeping life challenges and bad news or health concerns away from parents to make sure they aren't stressed
- Training siblings to rely on you for support rather than ‘bothering’ parents
- Staying diplomatic or emotionally distant in conflicts to keep the peace and not showing how they feel in the moment

Because parentified children are introduced to their parents' struggles so early and seriously, they overrepresent their parents' struggles in their worldview.

This dynamic becomes a significant part of the parent's identity and of you as you grow up too quickly and act as a cultural translator, emotional support and carrier of your parent's traumas, wounded inner child and unresolved patterns from their upbringing.

**Parentification can have some detrimental effects that are more prominent as we move on in life.**

We may have a low sense of self or identity (which is already hard enough being and living in at least two different cultures), loneliness and attachment issues and constant fear of ‘disrespecting’ and inconveniencing our parents. These issues can make us feel chronically depressed, anxious and reinforce low self-esteem and narratives about ourselves that don't help us to thrive and be our best selves.

We may sometimes forget that our parents are adults. They may have tried their best and took care of us in some ways and not others, but removing barriers for them cannot be the focus of our lives.

**We must live our own lives to live the life we desire.**

Are you feeling ready to take the next step in breaking this generational pattern?

If so, reach out for a free consultation and talk about how we can get together!

**With care,**



**Vera Cheng | Registered Social Worker, Psychotherapist**  
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