

Research article

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Emotional Burnout Symptoms in Mothers of Primary School Children: Role of Intensive Parenting Attitudes and Parenting Styles

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Abstract

Introduction. Symptoms of emotional burnout (EB) in mothers of primary school children are associated with parenting styles and intensive parenting attitudes. Mothers seeking psychological help for problems related to the education and rearing of primary school children are characterized by EB caused by contradictory parental attitudes embodied in parenting styles. **Methods.** The study aimed to determine the severity of intensive parenting attitudes among mothers of primary school children as a predictor of EB and parenting styles related to EB. The sample comprised women seeking psychological help at the Novomed-Deti multi-disciplinary clinic in Kaliningrad (n = 158). The study used the following diagnostic tools: (a) Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire; (b) Varga–Stolin Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire; (c) Maternal Burnout Questionnaire by L. I. Bazaleva; and (d) Luscher Color Test to diagnose the emotional sphere. Methods of mathematical and statistical analysis were used, including factor analysis with varimax rotation and Mann-Whitney U Test. **Results.** Mothers of primary school children with strong attitudes toward essentialism, intensive stimulation, difficulty and with low parental satisfaction are more prone to EB. Parenting styles with characteristic symptoms of maternal burnout, including rejection, infantilization – high EB level; authoritarian hypersocialization, symbiosis – average EB level; acceptance and social cooperation – low EB level, are described. **Discussion.** The data obtained can be used as the basis for the development of a comprehensive model for preventing EB in mothers and for overcoming parenting stress and parental dissatisfaction.

Keywords

emotional burnout in mothers, intensive parenting, parenting styles, parental attitudes, primary school children

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Introduction

The development of modern society requires innovative strategies to reveal individual and harmonized potential and strengthen the education system. Under modern conditions, the problem of family participation in the social-psychological adjustment of children to school is urgent (Baeva & Laktionova, 2017).

Learning is the leading activity in primary school age. If the child does not feel competent in educational activities, his/her personal development will be distorted (Vygotsky, 2019). To develop adequate self-esteem and a sense of competence in children in the first years of schooling, it is necessary for teachers and parents to create an atmosphere of psychological comfort and support (Goshin, Grigor'ev, & Mertsalova, 2019). Many mothers who have children between the ages of 5 and 14 and seek psychological help admit in a confidential conversation with a psychologist that they really love their children, see the meaning of their life in them and wish only the best for them. However, they often scream and hit their children, experiencing anger, constant irritation, anxiety, guilt, and emptiness related to certain aspects of interaction with children, which is exacerbated by adaptation to the demands of school life. Mothers who have high expectations for themselves and their children with intensive parenting attitudes may often suffer from chronic stress, accompanied by emotional burnout (hereinafter referred to as EB). Chronic stress in the mother cannot have a beneficial effect on the adaptation of the child. Unresolved psychological difficulties, dissatisfaction with various aspects of interactions, mother's high anxiety can have a negative impact on her attitude toward the child and make it difficult to provide him with appropriate emotional support, which is essential in the first years of school education (Kamakina, 2021; Karabanova, 2017; Molostova, 2016; Filippova, 2002).

Based on the studies by Yu. V. Misiyuk, N. Yu. Molostova, and K. N. Polivanova (2015), R. V. Ovcharova, M. S. Astoyants, D. E. Boiko, we understand "intensive parenting attitudes" in women as an educational approach that emphasizes the child-centred and active involvement of mothers in all areas of the lives and development of children. In addition

to the positive aspects of this phenomenon, it is also interesting to pay attention to the tendency to create parental perfectionism which contributes to higher parenting stress levels.

Our theoretical review focuses on conceptualizing the concepts of parenting stress and ways to cope with it (Apanovich, 2023), in which we consider parenting stress to be the cause and consequence of child-parent relationship deterioration; its cumulative effect can lead to emotional burnout in the parent.

The theoretical basis for the concept of emotional burnout was the model proposed by L. A. Bazaleva. The model reveals the multidimensional nature of EB construct, which main components are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, reduced personal accomplishment, and social isolation (Bazaleva, 2010).

Factors related to parents and families influence the effectiveness of psycho-correction interventions for children and adolescents (Serykh & Lifintseva, 2014). High levels of parenting stress can hinder the effective work of psychologists when they need psychological support and correction for children. The "parental" factors contributing to the success of psychological work with children include parental self-efficacy, which refers to the ideas of the father and mother in relation to their parental competence; participation of parents in the process of psycho-correction and cooperation with a child psychologist; parental adherence to psychotherapy, etc. The presence of psychopathology among parents, the high degree of parenting stress, increased hostility and criticism of children are factors that have a negative impact on the process of psychological work with children and adolescents.

Purpose

This study aims to identify mothers with EB symptoms among parents who sought psychological support and correction for primary-age children. Our aim is also to establish the relationship between the EB level, severity of intensive motherhood attitudes and parental styles.

We hypothesized that the EB of mothers of young children is influenced not only by parenting styles, but also by intensive parenting attitudes associated with ideas of essentialism, child-centrism, and stimulation. We also hypothesized that mothers who avoid burnout have personal resources that allow them to choose effective strategies to cope with parenting stress and not to classify interactions with their children as frustrating.

Methods

The study was carried out in 2022–2023, at the Novomed-Deti multi-disciplinary clinic in Kaliningrad.

Sample

The study comprised 158 mothers of primary school children who sought help from a child psychologist. All children had normal ontogenesis.

This sample was derived from the total number of requests, which totaled 420 requests from mothers who also raise preschool children and adolescents, including those with developmental disorders, congenital neurological and somatic diseases.

Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

The sample comprised 158 women aged from 29 to 57 years ($M = 38$ years), 83 mothers with only one child (52 %), 64 mothers with two children (41 %), 11 mothers with three or more children (7 %).

Of the 158 mothers, 93 (59 %) raised children in a two-parent family, 65 mothers (41 %) raised children alone (due to divorce, outside of marriage, long-term (3-6 months) permanent business trips of a partner).

Also, 14 women (9 %) raised IVF-conceived children, and 19 women became mothers only after 2 or more unsuccessful pregnancies (12 %).

Five women were adoptive mothers (3 %) of their children; 118 mothers (75 %) were employed.

Socio-demographic characteristics of children

There were 87 boys (55 %) and 71 girls (45 %) aged 6 to 9 years ($M = 7$ years), school students of grades 1-3 of 16 municipal and private educational institutions in Kaliningrad, including 8 schools, 5 gymnasiums, and 3 lyceums. 131 children (83 %) participated in other intellectual, sports and/or creative clubs and areas.

Diagnostic tools

In accordance with the theoretical justifications stated for the hypothesis, the research methods were as follows: survey, conversation. The study used the following diagnostic tools: (a) Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire (M. Liss, H. H. Schiffrin, V. H. Mackintosh, H. Miles-McLean, and M. J. Erchull, 2013; modified by Yu. V. Misiyuk, A. I. Prikhidko, and P. S. Rogacheva, 2020–2022); (b) Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire (Varga & Stolin, 1988); (c) Maternal Burnout Questionnaire (Bazaleva, 2010); and (d) Luscher Color Test (Luscher, 1970) which allows to avoid socially desirable responses when assessing respondents' current emotional states.

To process the results, mathematical and statistical analysis methods were used, including factor analysis with varimax rotation and Mann-Whitney U test (Statistica 7.0).

Results

We found that the EB symptoms (above 30 % of the maximum score by 12 scales) were diagnosed in 96 (61 %) of 158 mothers. Symptoms common to all 96 mothers included "anxiety" (71 %), "selective emotional response" (55 %), "economy of emotions" (39 %), and "depersonalization" (34 %).

The overall level of intensive parenting attitudes in mothers with EB symptoms was $X_{avg} \pm \sigma = 58.14 \pm 5.54$, and in mothers without EB was $X_{avg} \pm \sigma = 74.22 \pm 3.12$.

The child-centrism indicator, i.e. placing the child at the center of the family system, characterized by the adjustment of mothers' personal needs to the needs of children, is a fundamental component of the intensive parenting model, closely interrelated with others, such as stimulation, essentialism, difficulty, and parenting satisfaction. This indicator does not have significant differences between the groups of mothers with EB ($X_{avg} \pm \sigma = 66.31 \pm 4.72$) and without EB ($X_{avg} \pm \sigma = 61.27 \pm 3.48$).

Essentialism is an attitude that reflects the belief that women are the best in parenting. Essentialism is most characteristic of mothers who raise primary school alone. Essentialism has significant differences in severity in the groups of mothers with EB ($X_{avg} \pm \sigma = 76.81 \pm 7.64$) and without EB ($X_{avg} \pm \sigma = 28.33 \pm 5.42$).

The results on the "stimulation" scale are equally high in both groups of mothers: $X_{avg} \pm \sigma = 83.11 \pm 6.72$ for mothers with EB and $X_{avg} \pm \sigma = 88.47 \pm 2.36$ for mothers without EB. This reflects the general trend of Russian mothers to strive to contribute in every way to the early development of children. At the beginning of schooling, development stimulation becomes competitive and reinforced by school requirements and performance assessment systems.

Mothers with EB consider parenting to be very difficult ($X_{avg} \pm \sigma = 85.54 \pm 1.35$), while estimating the pleasure of parenting low ($X_{avg} \pm \sigma = 26, 14 \pm 5.52$). On the contrary, mothers without EB are convinced that caring for the child and his needs brings them great pleasure ($X_{avg} \pm \sigma = 91.64 \pm 0.58$) and do not see much difficulty in fulfilling their parental responsibilities ($X_{avg} \pm \sigma = 29.17 \pm 2.41$).

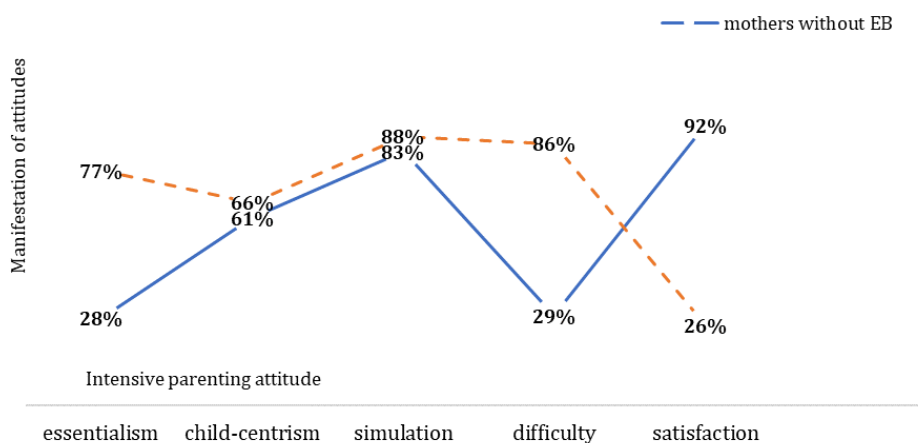
To determine the significance of differences in the average values of intensive parenting attitudes (child-centrism, essentialism, stimulation, difficulty, satisfaction) in two samples (mothers with and without EB), the Mann-Whitney U test was used, confirming statistically significant differences in the manifestation of the trait in these samples (U_{amp0} , U_{cr1} , at $p \leq 0.01$). Therefore, attitudes toward essentialism, high difficulties of parenting and low parenting satisfaction are, in all probability, associated with the emotional well-being of mothers of primary school children.

Based on the diagnosis results of the Luscher Color Test, in the group of mothers with EB we observed the following characteristics of the psychophysiological state, which varied depending on the intensity of the following EB symptoms: stress; anxiety; functional psychosomatic disorders; negative protest reactions; tendency to unexpected

destructive reactions in a state of passion; dissatisfaction with basic needs; emotional instability; suppression of the need for self-realization; lack of recognition by significant others; and rigid attitudes.

Figure 1

Differences in intensive parenting attitudes between mothers with and without EB



Unlike mothers with EB, among mothers without EB there were more common states characterized by optimism, easy adaptation to different social roles, artistry, kindness, conformity of attitudes, strong and deep need for affection, sensitivity in interpersonal communication, responsiveness to environmental influences, and careful approach to problem solving. This difference is likely to be related to a higher level of development of social creativity, a component of socio-psychological competence, as a personality characteristic that contributes to coping with parenting stress (Il'inykh, 2011; Luneva, 2012; Meshkova, Enikolopov, Zharinova, & Mukovnina, 2022).

According to the Varga-Stolin Questionnaire results, the mothers who showed acceptance and social cooperation in parental attitudes represented 39 % of the sample (n = 62). They tend to accept the child as he is, respect his individuality, and show sympathy for him. The child's abilities are highly appreciated, and his initiative and independence are promoted. An unconditional acceptance and cooperation enable parents to spend a lot of time with their children, respect their interests and plans without compromising their emotional well-being. This group of mothers is the least prone to burnout. The total level of EB for these mothers is an average of 7 % of the maximum possible.

Mothers with EB demonstrate the following parenting styles:

1. **Rejection.** The child is perceived as bad, helpless, and disadvantaged. It seems to the parent that the child will not succeed in life due to a difficult character, bad inclinations, low abilities, including physical, intellectual and creative. The child is often criticized,

regarded as ungrateful, and the psychologist is asked to change him. The rejection is typical of 12 % of the sample (n = 19). The overall level of EB is high, on average 82 % of the maximum possible. Factor analysis with varimax rotation allowed us to identify the following four main components from the 12 symptoms specified in the Maternal Burnout Questionnaire scales: "emotional and moral disorientation" (factor loadings up to 0.91), "selective emotional response" (factor loadings up to 0.84), "reduction of maternal interaction" (factor loadings up to 0.76), and "depersonalization" (factor loadings up to 0.72).

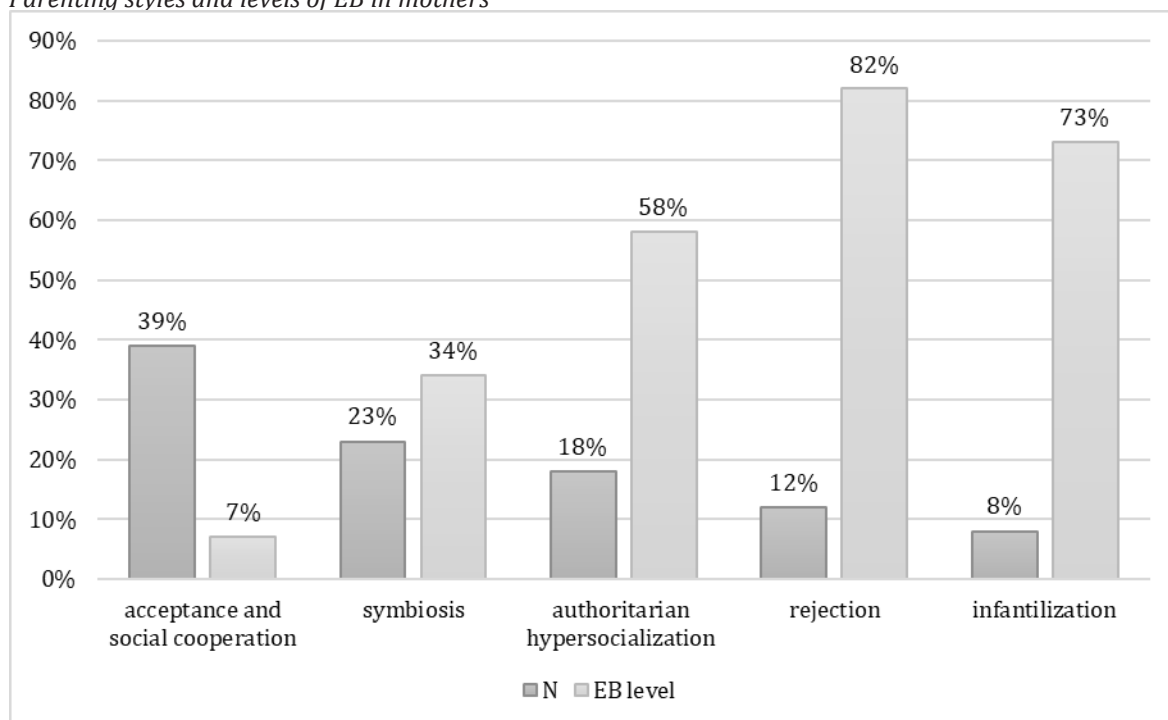
2. Authoritarian hypersocialization. A parent with such a style of behavior requires unconditional obedience and discipline from the child. He tries to impose his will on the child in everything, unable to take his point of view. A child is severely punished for showing his or her self-will. The parent closely monitors the child's social achievements, individual characteristics, and habits. 18 % of the sample (n = 28) showed authoritarianism toward the child. The overall level of EB is low, on average 58 % of the maximum possible. According to the principal component analysis, the mothers of this group show the main symptoms of EB, including: "selective emotional response" (factor loadings up to 0.78), "emotional deficit" (factor loadings up to 0.71), and "emotional detachment" (factor loadings up to 0.66).

3. Symbiosis. The parent feels as one with the child; in this merging he/she joins the anxieties and fears of the child, thinks that he is weak and defenseless, which sometimes does not correspond to reality. They meet all the needs of their children; children are protected from all possible difficulties and problems of life, which greatly complicates the necessary process of their autonomy. The symbiosis is demonstrated by 23 % of the sample (n = 36). The total level of EB is low – 34 % of maximum possible. The main symptoms of EB in symbiotic mothers according to the results of the principal component analysis are the following: "anxiety" (factor loadings up to 0.93), "self-dissatisfaction" (factor loadings up to 0.85) and "psychosomatic disorders" (factor loadings up to 0.64).

4. Infantilization. Parents desire to infantilize the child, to blame him for his personal and social failure. Children's interests, hobbies and thoughts seem to parents to be too childish for their age. The child seems ineffective, unsuccessful and open to bad influence. The parent is annoyed by the child's failures and does not trust him. Infantilization of children was typical for 8 % of the sample (n = 13). The overall level of EB is high, with an average of 73 % of the maximum possible. According to the results of the principal component analysis, the EB symptoms in mothers infantilizing their children are the following: "economy of emotions" (factor loadings up to 0.87), "emotional and moral disorientation" (factor loadings up to 0.82), "emotional detachment" (factor loadings up to 0.71), and "anxiety" (factor loadings up to 0.63).

Figure 2 shows parenting styles and levels of EB.

Figure 2
Parenting styles and levels of EB in mothers



Discussion

This study confirmed our hypothesis that mothers of primary school children involved in intensive parenting experience EB. Conscious attitudes of intensive parenting often conflict with stable patterns of parental behavior uncritically learned in childhood. Maternal burnout requires socio-psychological support.

Acceptance and social cooperation parenting styles mainly contribute to the emotional well-being of mothers.

Mothers who show "rejection" and "infantilization" towards their children and to a moderate extent – "authoritarian hypersocialization" and "symbiosis" – are more likely to develop EB. At the same time, the higher the level of their EB, the more pronounced the attitudes toward essentialism, difficulty, and low returns in parental activity.

Our data are consistent with the results of previous studies emphasizing that maternal burnout is becoming increasingly common due to increasing social demands for the quality of parental work (Akinkina, 2020; Misiyuk, 2022; Mikolajczak, Aunola, Sorkkila & Roskam, 2023). Emotional burnout of mothers differs from postpartum depression (Yakupova & Suarez, 2023) and can have a long-term impact on the child's development. Studies in this field appear to be promising for further psychological and educational research.

Searching for factors that determine the presence of emotional burnout in mothers from various sources is varied. In addition to external ones, i.e. socio-demographic, economic and political (Van Bakel, Van Engen, & Peters, 2018; Nieves, Clements-Hickman, & Davies, 2021; Favez, Max, Bader, & Tissot, 2022) and factors associated with impaired child ontogeny; intrapersonal characteristics of mothers are also considered, including her socio-psychological type, degree of acceptance of maternal identity, and preferred coping strategies for coping with stress (Gallegos, Jacobvitz, Sasaki, & Hazen, 2019; Lebert-Charron, Dorard, Boujut, & Wendland, 2018; Raudasoja, Sorkkila, & Aunola, 2023). In addition, we examined the style of parental relationship as a system of patterns of mother-child interaction, reflecting the parents' different feelings toward the child, ideas about his sociopsychological competence, behavioral stereotypes practiced in communication with the child, which are most often acquired by mothers through the continuity of intergenerational transmission (Bowen, 1978; Ovcharova, 2006; Smirnova & Khaneliya, 2019; Stolin, Sokolova & Varga, 1989).

According to the results of the Luscher Colour Test diagnostics, the most common personality traits contributing to the emotional and productive interaction of mothers with primary school children are optimism, artistry, kindness, a thoughtful problem-solving and sensitivity to environmental influences. If these characteristics are combined into a single structure, we may assume that mothers who are resistant to EB develop social creativity.

The overcoming of emotional burnout is related to: 1) receiving social and psychological support and reaching emotional balance; 2) the analysis and correction of parents' attitudes and styles in relation to the child; 3) the development of mother's social creativity as a personal resource for coping with parenting stress.

Our results enabled us to identify objectives of psycho-correctional work, including:

- debunking unproductive attitudes (the "ideal mother" cult, success and perfectionism);
- elaboration (search, understanding, and reaction) of dysfunctional patterns of the family system;
- expanding the repertoire of skills for mother-child interpersonal interaction through the development of social creativity.

Our results are the basis for developing an integrated psychotherapy model for mothers suffering from emotional burnout who raise primary school children and require psychological help and support.

It is interesting, for example, to continue developing the problem in the form of improved diagnostic tools, as questionnaires, unlike projection tests, have a number of known shortcomings (e.g. social preferences factors (especially pronounced in mothers who are trying to be perfect), and the predominant cognitive understanding of experience in answers to the detriment of emotional components).

Conclusion

Symptoms of emotional burnout occur in more than half of mothers (61%) who sought psychological help for problems related to the education and rearing of primary school children with normal ontogenesis. Groups of mothers with and without emotional burnout differ significantly in the severity of intensive parenting attitudes (Uamp0, Ucr1, at $p \leq 0.01$). Of the 12 EB symptoms, the highest factor loading as a result of the rotation was obtained by "anxiety", "emotional detachment", and "selective emotional response". Mothers of primary school children who are optimistic, friendly, sensitive to environmental influences, who accept their child as he is and who seek to enter a relationship of social cooperation cope with parenting stress and avoid emotional burnout.

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Author Contribution

Tat'yana Mikhailovna Apanovich developed the main concept and formulated the purpose of the study, selected diagnostic tools, collected and analyzed the results, and wrote the text of the manuscript.

Anna Borisovna Serykh contributed to the theoretical justification of research objectives, developed the methodology of the study, interpreted the results, and edited the text of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest Information

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.