

# Parental burnout can lead to harmful outcomes for parent and child

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When the daily stress of parenting becomes chronic it can turn into parental burnout, an intense exhaustion that leads parents to feel detached from their children and unsure of their parenting abilities,

according to research published in *Clinical Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science. This type of burnout can have serious consequences for both parent and child, increasing parental neglect, harm, and thoughts about escape.

"In the current cultural context, there is a lot of pressure on parents," says lead researcher Moïra Mikolajczak of UCLouvain. "But being a perfect parent is impossible and attempting to be one can lead to exhaustion. Our research suggests that whatever allows parents to recharge their batteries, to avoid exhaustion, is good for children."

Mikolajczak and coauthors James J. Gross of Stanford University and Isabelle Roskam of UCLouvain became interested in the issue through their clinical encounters with good parents who, as a result of their exhaustion, had become the opposite of what they were trying to be. Although previous research had explored the causes of parental burnout, relatively little was known about its consequences. The researchers decided to directly examine the outcomes associated with parental burnout in two studies that followed parents over time.

In the first study, Mikolajczak and colleagues recruited parents through social networks, schools, pediatricians, and other sources to participate in research on "parental well-being and exhaustion." The parents, mostly French-speaking adults in Belgium, completed three batches of online surveys spaced about 5.5 months apart.

The surveys included a 22-item measure of parental burnout that gauged parents' emotional exhaustion, emotional distancing, and feelings of inefficacy; a six-item measure that gauged their thoughts about escaping their family; a 17-item measure that gauged the degree to which they neglected their childrens' physical, educational and emotional needs; and a 15-item measure that gauged their tendency to engage in verbal, physical, or psychological violence.

Because many of the questions asked about sensitive topics, the researchers also measured participants' tendency to choose the most socially desirable responses when confronted with probing questions.

A total of 2,068 parents participated in the first survey, with 557 still participating at the third survey.

Participants' data revealed a strong association between burnout and the three variables—escape ideation, parental [neglect](#), and parental violence—at each of the three time points.

Parental burnout at the first and second survey was associated with later parental neglect, parental violence, and escape ideation. The researchers found that parental burnout and parental neglect had a circular relationship: Parental burnout led to increased parental neglect, which led to increased burnout, and so on. Parental violence appeared to be a clear consequence of burnout.

Importantly, all of these patterns held even when the researchers took participants' tendency toward socially desirable responding into account.

A second online study with mostly English-speaking parents in the UK produced similar findings.

Together, the data suggest that parental burnout is likely the cause of escape ideation, parental neglect, and parental violence.

"We were a bit surprised by the irony of the results," says Mikolajczak. "If you want to do the [right thing](#) too much, you can end up doing the wrong thing. Too much pressure on parents can lead them to exhaustion which can have damaging consequences for the parent and for the children."

Additional studies are needed to confirm and extend these findings with broader samples and measures. Nonetheless, the robust pattern of results suggests that there are important lessons to be learned from these findings, the researchers say.

"Parents need to know that self-care is good for the child and that when they feel severely [exhausted](#), they should seek help. Health and child services professionals need to be informed about parental burnout so that they can accurately diagnose it and provide parents with the most appropriate care. And those engaged in policy and public health need to help raise awareness and lift the taboo on parental [burnout](#), which will encourage [parents](#) to seek the help they need," Mikolajczak concludes.

**More information:** Moïra Mikolajczak et al, Parental Burnout: What Is It, and Why Does It Matter?, *Clinical Psychological Science* (2019).  
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